

HOMESICKNESS

some tips for long-distance parents of first time campers

WHAT IS HOMESICKNESS: THE ILLUSIVE DISEASE

Within a couple of weeks many of you first time parents will receive a tear-stained letter, in choked-up handwriting stating something like **“I’m miserable. Everyone at camp hates me. I wanna go home!”** Although, not all children are homesick the first time they’re away from their families for more than a few days, it is a very natural and common occurrence to many. Homesickness, like other culture shock, is a normal, predictable response to an frightening situation - a transition from family as primary group to cabin as primary group. Separation from one’s family and friends, loss of daily contact with familiar surroundings, and the normal resultant grieving of that loss are aspects of relationships that each of us experience, learn how to handle, and integrate as part of becoming older and wiser. Seen in this light, homesickness is a necessary and growth-producing process - a minor crisis with a built-in sense of opportunity. It is a dynamic process of adjustment rather than a static, one-time problem.

WHAT TO DO BEFORE CAMP:

The way a child is prepared for a first summer at camp may be more important than the child’s personality or even his age in determining whether he’ll be homesick, say psychologists. “The more a child knows about a camp before he goes, the more likely he’ll adjust well,” said Bruce Muchnick, a psychologist in Philadelphia who consults with camps. Review brochures or videos and visit with friends and neighbors who are veterans to find out the daily schedule, some traditions, exciting activities, etc. and go over them with your son.

A new Camper who has never spent time in the country can have frightening fantasies about the hidden dangers of summer camp. To an eight-year-old, the woods might be filled with dangerous wild animals. The river might harbor a distant relative of jaws. Ask your son about the animals and people he pictures living in the woods and river, and reassure him without belittling his fears. (**and DON'T rent Friday the 13th**).

Talk to the child about what homesickness might feel like and be sure to explain that it goes away after a day or two. “Talking about it can inoculate your child against becoming homesick,” advised Hugh Leichtman, a clinical psychologist and camp director in Boston. Assure him that he is not alone in having these concerns.

Examine and express your own feelings about your son’s leaving for the summer. **“Homesickness is as much a parent’s problem as it is a child’s problem,”** said Bob Ditter, a social worker and former camp director. Let your child know that even though you will miss him, you expect him to have a good time.

Talk to your child about the successes he will have at camp, but be careful not to put pressure on him to perform to a certain standard. It’s often better to say “Won’t it be great when you can show us all around and introduce us to the people you’ve met” than “You’ll be able to show us how you’ve learned to swim in the river and to ride a horse.” Having fun should be the priority. Awards or special trips should come second.

As the departure day approaches, many children start saying they don’t want to go to camp after all. Your child’s nervousness about leaving home is a normal experience of "cold feet". Find out your son's specific concerns and encourage him to discuss them. One of the big issues for children is a fear that they will be teased, humiliated or put down by people they don’t know for failing to meet some imaginary standard or that they'll be a lonely outcast. Talk to your son about the successes he has had in other new situations like going to a new school. Remind him of the counselor's role as big brother and surrogate parent. He will always have an ally.

Two final techniques can help lower the likelihood or the severity of homesickness. **Have a letter from you waiting for your child when he arrives at camp.** In it, encourage him to try new things and remind him how often you’ll write. Also, **don’t buy an all-new wardrobe for your child.** The memories stored in an old pair of

AFTER THEY ARRIVE:

Most every new camper will exhibit some symptoms of homesickness during the first night away from home. In virtually every case, the cure comes with the first day of activity. Before you react, check the postmark of the first letter you get. It was likely written then, and the symptoms are already gone by the time you read about it.

Beyond the first night, more severe cases may even exhibit physical symptoms like stomach ache, headache, or loss of appetite, yet the core issue is one of adjustment to a new environment. Most cases of homesickness are dealt with directly by the counselor. All that most boys need is time to adjust and a worldly figure to help them get things into perspective. Such approaches as "special time" with the counselor, pairing up the child with a veteran camper, or getting really busy with extra activities are successful. We realize that parents know their child best, and we welcome extra information and advice about your child. Should your camper have a great deal of difficulty dealing with homesickness, which the camper and counselor are not able to "get through," one of the directors will contact you by phone for additional information about the child. After the first few days, we'll need to work together.

We have found the following guidelines helpful to our parents:

A. Your child should've had some say in the decision to attend camp. If he feels that he was forced, he may have some feelings of abandonment, which are generally much more difficult to help children through than just homesickness. His homesickness may actually be a way to "teach" you that you made the wrong decision.

B. Please keep us informed on any recent changes or upheavals in your family. Divorce, death, serious illness, a recent move, or intense competition in a sport or school area may still be unsettling for the child and cause additional stress. We find that camp is a very healthy place for dealing with stress because of the supportive environment.

C. Write letters that are newsy, not mushy, understanding and that express delight in the things that your camper is doing at camp. Lonesome letters about how much the dog misses your child or how the house just isn't the same without him usually contribute to homesickness. Include in your letters wishes of fun, good times and support for the camper adjusting to the new experience. Focus your letters on the camp experience, not what he's missing at home.

D. Send along a few familiar things (preferably small) such as pictures of the family, favorite stamps, stickers, magazines, etc.

E. Be prepared just in case you receive some forlorn and lonely letter about how much your child misses you and how terrible things are. This response is normal and shows that the child is working through the process of adjustment by expressing his feelings. If these letters persist, please contact the directors. Remember the time lag with the mail; sometimes it may be a week or two before the camper feels well-enough adjusted to let you know about the fun at camp. Most of the time the camper has already recovered from such low feelings by the time you receive your letter from him. Don't forget that most letters are written during quiet time, not exciting activities. Many boys have a great time for 23 hours a day, and miss Mom at bedtime only - hence a bad letter.

F. Please do not, under any circumstances, make deals with your camper concerning his length of stay at La Junta. Sending children home early is terribly disruptive to camp and to the other campers. Once the camper is enrolled, he is to be there for the duration of the term. A deal such as "if you don't like camp, you can come home after two weeks" is terribly detrimental. It leaves no reason to recover, only a premature finish line. **Overcoming homesickness is a major emotional victory...leaving early can cause a long-lasting sense of failure.**

If you will follow these suggestions, and if you will trust us to provide guidance and care for your son, we know being away from home for a period of time will be a process of cultivating independence, confidence, and new friendships.