

Homesickness: Preparing the First-Time Camper and Their Parent(s)

Summer camp is a unique respite from the pressures of everyday life. In addition to being fun, attending camp is a wonderful growing and learning opportunity for your child, and will provide him/her with skills, lessons, friendships and memories that will last a lifetime. Camp is a great place to unlock a child's potential, develop self-esteem and enhance their social skills while having the time of their lives. You as parents should feel good about providing your child with this wonderful opportunity, and the "letting go" will be good for both of you. It will help develop a healthy independence. For the first-time camper, how he/she is prepared will influence the overall experience, and parents are often the key to a rewarding and successful camp session.

First of all, parents should be supportive and sensitive. Any new experience, especially in a new environment, causes nervousness, but a positive outlook and encouragement are crucial to a successful camp experience. This includes parents as well as campers! According to Bob Ditter, a social worker and former camp director, "Homesickness is as much a parent's problem as it is a child's problem." Talk to your child about camp, the expectations, the activities, and the environment and, of course, the fun they will have. A prepared and encouraged child will feel less apprehensive about the impending camp term. Encourage overnight stays with friends and relatives prior to going to camp. This will help your child adjust to being away from home and adapting to new surroundings.

Secondly, how a parent responds to that first "homesick" letter can make or break the camp experience. According to University of California psychologist Chris Thurber, homesickness is actually the norm and not the exception. In his studies he found that a whopping 83% of the campers studied reported homesickness on at least one day of camp. David G. Richardson, Director of the Fay School, state, "Homesickness is a part of life. It's a part of growing up and breaking away. Most people experience homesickness at some time in their lives. Many people learn to cope with homesickness at summer camp, and camp is a good place to deal with the feeling of homesickness. Camp is a place for children to learn self-confidence. Camp is a place where children learn about responsibility. Camp is a place to have fun with new friends. Camp is a safe, caring environment where nurturing adults are trained to support children through this sometimes difficult growth process. Homesickness is normal and will go away!"

If you should receive a homesick letter from your camper, don't panic! If you can, wait for the next letter to see if the content has become more optimistic. Often the first couple of days are a big adjustment and it may take some time for your camper to become more involved in the program, cabin and activities and to make some friends. Be sympathetic, but positive and encouraging in your replies. Don't dwell on how much you miss them, how lonely things are without them or giving too much information about home which may cause anxiety. Ask lots of questions about camp, their activities, new friends, and be encouraging. Also, in this day of instant access, e-mail is wonderful for quick messages. Parents need to be careful, though, not to send so many instant "messages" that they interfere with their child's adjustment to camp life. *If the homesick letters continue, be prepared to work with camp staff to help your child work through the situation.* Call camp and express your concerns. Let the staff investigate the situation and get back with you. Have faith in your camper and the camp staff. Your child's camp counselors play an important role in the adjustment process and are probably the most instrumental persons in dealing with your camper. They are prepared. Let them do the job you have entrusted them to do.

We take the attitude that homesickness is a natural occurrence and simply means that a camper misses his/her family and the security of being with them. Our job is to help your camper work through these feelings and to learn to feel secure in the camp environment. Rest assured that if your child is having an extremely difficult time at camp that someone from camp will contact you to discuss the best way to handle the situation and your child. If you don't hear from camp, but the letters home are sad, then this could mean your child is writing homesick letters, but not exhibiting homesick behavior. It is very possible that your camper is actually doing well at camp, but had a low moment of some kind which he/she needed to share with you. View this as a compliment because your child trusts you and knows he/she can count on you for comfort and encouragement at that difficult moment.

Please avoid the temptation to pick your child up early if he/she is unhappy, or to "make a deal". Avoid telling your child, "If you give camp a few days and don't like it, I will come get you." The offer to rescue your child is done with the best of intentions, but a child may focus on nothing else but how to make this happen and will never give camp a fair chance. Don't feel guilty about encouraging your child to stay at camp. This opportunity is the first step toward independence and plays an important role in their growth and development. However, trust your instincts. A very small percentage of homesick cases can be severe, with a camper not eating or sleeping and suffering from severe anxiety or depression. In these circumstances, camp will work with the families and camper to get through this rough time, but in rare occasions it may be necessary for the child to go home. If this is the decision, the remaining time spent at home is vital to keeping the child productive and minimizing blows to his/her self-esteem. Discuss what worked and didn't work for your child at camp. Emphasize that it was a learning experience and discuss what was learned. Focus on the positive and encourage your child to try a new adventure or program next summer.

We will do everything in our power to insure a memorable and happy camp experience for your child. If you have any concerns this summer, please let us know. Our goal is for your camper to be with us for many summers and that Vista Camps will be their "home away from home" each summer!