

Homesickness

What is it?

Homesickness is a normal feeling. It is the natural result of separating from home and loved ones. To put it into perspective, a recent study reports nearly 96% of all boys and girls who were spending two weeks or more at overnight camp reported some homesickness on at least one day. People's feelings simply vary in intensity—some are only homesick for a day, some are every day and it disrupts their daily functioning.

What causes it?

There are several factors that put children at greater risk for becoming homesick. For example, children with little previous experience away from home, children who have low expectations of camp, children who feel forced to go to camp, children who are unsure whether adults will help them if they need help, children who have little practice coping with negative emotions, and children whose parents express a lot of anxiety are most likely to feel homesick.

When is it a problem?

Most feelings of homesickness are not problematic. In fact, missing home isn't a problem until it becomes a preoccupation. When the feelings of sadness and anxiety associated with missing home become so strong that making friends, having fun, sleeping, eating, and participating in activities is difficult, something must be done.

What can be done?

It used to be thought that feelings of missing home disappeared spontaneously after a few days at camp. Although this is true for some cases of mild homesickness, research has demonstrated that if left unchecked, homesickness can intensify over time. The best remedy is a two-pronged approach: 1) Prevent homesickness at home, before it starts; and 2) Actively cope at camp if homesickness reaches problematic levels.

Before they go:

As parents, there are some ways you can help your child be more prepared to go off to camp.

- Discuss what camp will be like before your child leaves. This includes discussing activities, daytime/nighttime routines. Use the camp's website or literature to talk about daily schedules, routines, activities and events. Consider role-playing anticipated situations, such as using a flashlight to find the bathroom.
- Use a three-pronged approach—doing, thinking and feeling. Help them come up with ideas about what they can do so they don't miss home. Discuss some thinking strategies—how to stop worrying, think positively, and understand the power of thought. The most important thing is to have conversations with your kids about how they are feeling, validate those feelings, and discuss how they can cope with these negative feelings. Acknowledge their fears. Show empathy and understanding and listen. Sometimes your child just wants to know that you have heard him or her.
- Help your child identify what it is they are worrying about. Assure them that it's normal to have fears. Don't feed into fears by asking questions focusing on concerns, such as "Are you nervous about being in a boat? Let them lead the discussion.
- Coach them to come up with ways to solve their problem. Telling your child that "things will be okay" doesn't help them get past their fears. Encourage your child to give you some ideas of ways they can deal with what's concerning them. This type of problem-solving helps them learn coping skills and teaches them critical thinking so they can develop a plan instead of simply reacting negatively.
- Reassurances can backfire. Unless your child mentions anxiety about camp, avoid spur-of-the-moment comments like, "Don't worry. Everything will be fine." This will only imply that there's something to worry about.
- Let your child pack their own bags and encourage them to include a few pieces of "home" that helps them feel calm/secure (favorite pillow, stuffed animal or blanket, something that smells like home). You can pack a picture of you or write a few notes to open throughout the week.
- Don't use bribery. Linking a successful stay at camp to a material object sends the wrong message. The reward should be your child's new-found confidence and independence.

At camp (the good news):

- When children arrive at camp with a repertoire of coping strategies and some practice at home under their belts, they are ready for those normal feelings of homesickness. Again, talking with them about what camp is going to be like this year and listening to their feelings and thoughts will help them at camp.
- Best of all, you are sending them to a vibrant camp with high quality staff with education and strategies on how to make campers' experience successful. Pre-season training includes understanding emotional regulation for our staff and campers, tips on how to

help kids regulate with focus on building relationships with campers, and ways to help youth identify ways to feel safe and secure when they are feeling homesick.

With this in mind, consider the following:

1. If you know your child has a tendency towards anxiousness, fear or worry, seek support from a counselor or social worker before they go to camp to help increase their skills. Kids hear information and suggestions differently from a non-parent. Often the counselor/social worker is saying the same information as you, but kids are often more open to hearing it from someone other than a parent.
2. The most common mistake parents make is the "Pick-Up Deal." It's normal for children to ask, "What if I feel homesick?" Tell your child that some feelings of homesickness are normal and help him practice coping before camp starts. But never ever say, "If you feel homesick, I'll come and get you." This conveys a message of doubt and pity that undermines children's confidence and independence. Pick-Up Deals become mental crutches and self-fulfilling prophecies for children as soon as they arrive at camp.
3. Trust your instincts. While most incidents of homesickness will pass in a day or two, Research shows that approximately seven percent of the cases are severe. If your child is not eating or sleeping because of anxiety or depression, camp leadership will work with you to understand what to do. In the rare case when a camper returns home, don't make your child feel like a failure if their stay at camp is cut short. Focus on the positive and encourage your child to try camp again next year.