

Homesickness: Dispelling the Myths
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- "I like camp, but I want to go home."
- "Can I call home? My mom told me to call her if I felt this way."
- "I miss my mom, dad, and sister."
- "My stomach hurts, I want my mom."

Sound familiar? The above statements are heard quite often by camp directors, camp staff, and camp nurses. Homesickness is continually addressed with every new camp season, but not fully understood. What are some of the concepts regarding homesickness and separation anxiety? What can camp directors and camp staff do to prevent and minimize homesickness in campers?

What is homesickness?

Homesickness, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is a "longing for home and family while absent from them." For many children, camp is the first and the longest time they will be away from home. Separation from parents has been called one of the strongest fears in childhood. Children show decreasing sensitivity to separation stressors as they grow older, suggesting that the changes in separation anxiety are developmental in nature. A study by Halpern suggests that separation anxiety remains a concern even for the 11-year-old child, though not always overtly expressed.

Baier and Welch analyzed the concept of homesickness. They developed a list of criteria considered necessary in individuals experiencing homesickness. The criteria are:

- Homesickness happens universally to all age groups under conditions of being away from home.
- Homesickness frequently is not acknowledged nor are the feelings processed intrapersonally.
- Children who are homesick are generally encouraged to suppress their feelings.
- In adults and older children, homesickness is sometimes experienced with embarrassment or denial.
- Homesickness is a pervasive feeling of sadness and thoughts of the place left.
- Somatic complaints may accompany the longing for home or family.

Axmear and Erceg used the above criteria to analyze homesick campers. They validated that homesickness appears within all age groups and in both genders. They found that campers processed feelings intrapersonally by saying they were "homesick," which does not support Baier and Welch criteria. They also discovered that campers' feelings of sadness were much more prevalent than thoughts of the place left. This sadness was exhibited by crying and sad facial expressions.

Winland-Brown and Maheady surveyed camp nurses to begin to define the physical and behavioral characteristics of homesick campers. Physical symptoms were stomach ache/nausea; headache; minor aches and pains; chronic, vague complaints; poor appetite; sleep disturbance; and sore throat. The behaviors exhibited were talking about home all the time; not wanting to eat; crying; depression (quiet, withdrawn, listless); sad facial expressions; attention-seeking behavior (acting out, abusive, fighting); frequent visits to health center; and an unwillingness to participate in camp activities.

Developmentally appropriate

To better understand homesickness and provide a framework for developing effective interventions, we need to begin to think of homesickness as developmentally appropriate for children. Learning to cope with the perceivable stress of separation from family/home is a part of growing and developing into a more independent individual.

Children who learn to cope with situations or events that are potentially stressful, such as going to camp, gain a feeling of mastery over themselves and their environment. This brings to children the realization that a difficult problem or task has been solved or accomplished and that they will be able to do so again. This process continues throughout their lives. Studies by Fisher et al. suggest that about 60-70% of students report homesickness in their first weeks at college.

It is not the separation experience itself that activates a crisis, but the interpretation of it by the child. One method of helping a child cope with stress is stress-immunization.

Stress-immunization employs a variety of intervention techniques aimed at early preparation of potentially stressful event. One technique is for a child to gain knowledge and understanding of the situation. Another involves the parents. As parents gain information and become more knowledgeable about what occurs, they feel more competent as well.

Make separation less stressful

Separating from home/family and adjusting to the camp experience is part of going to camp. It happens every summer. Campers and staff adapt to the new situation based on their past experiences with separation. Some adapt easier than others. Those campers who have never been away from home by themselves may take longer to adjust than those who are veteran campers. Even campers who have been to camp for many years need a few days to adjust to having a new bunk, new staff, and new campers. Everyone at camp experiences this in some way.

Separation can be less stressful when you:

- Prepare the child and parents for the camp experience.
- Educate staff about homesickness.
- Develop a plan for the child who has adjustment problems.
- Follow-up at the end of the camp session.

The first step is to provide families with plenty of information about camp. As children learn more about the experience, they are able to form more realistic expectations. As parents learn, their stress is reduced and they are better able to emotionally support the child.

Prepare for camp

There are many ways to help children prepare for camp. The following list offers several suggestions.

- Encourage parents and campers to read books about going to camp. Examples of two children's book are *Off to Camp* (Prevada, Weiland, 1990) which is a realistic view of resident camp and *Pinky and Rex Go To Camp* (Howe, 1992) which helps a reluctant child decide to go to camp.
- Suggest parents and campers speak with other parents and friends to learn about their experiences about camp.
- Supply the family with literature that familiarizes them with the camp environment, the daily routine/schedule, activities, and the dress at camp. Encourage them to visit camp.
- Suggest to parents that they encourage their child to pick out his/her own clothes; help with packing; and learn to make the bed, set the table, and use a broom. If the child takes daily medication, ask the child to remind the parent when the medication should be taken.
- Recommend to parents that they problem solve with their child about anticipatory camp problems; "What if you lose your baseball glove? What will you do if you don't feel well?" Think through options to solve the problem. Write down the suggestions, choose one to try, and decide if it would work. If not, try another solution to the problem.
- Parents can practice with their child how to respond to camp situations by role playing as the counselor or camp director. Parents can also walk in the dark with their child, using a flashlight and listening to night sounds (which are different in the county than the city).
- Inform the family about communication at camp and the camp phone policy. Many working parents depend on the telephone to check in with their child several times a day. Explain how difficult it would be for 100 campers to phone home.
- Correspondence at camp is primarily through the mail. Recommend parents write often and send one letter before the child leaves for camp so the camper will receive mail the first day. Suggest that children practice writing letters or postcards; this is often an assumed skill that has never been used. Advise parents to pre-address envelopes and postcards for their child. Some camps now accept Fax correspondence. Explain your camp policy. Send parents examples of letters written by campers and suggest what parents might write to campers. Inform them that it is best to use the word "love" more than "miss."
- Share with parents and the camper that homesickness is a normal part of the adjustment process to separation from family. Encourage parents to discuss feelings the child has had when leaving home to go to school, staying all night at a friend's, or being left alone at home for the first time. The feelings the child experienced were natural, normal and didn't last too long.

- Suggest that parents prepare themselves for the separation. Reassure anxious parents that they have chosen a good camp and their child will be well cared for. Inform them it is normal to have mixed feelings of pleasure and sadness when their child leaves for camp. They will also experience a period of adjustment to their child not being home.
- Make it known to parents that the camp director is available for their concerns.

Educate Staff

The second step in dealing with homesickness is preparing the camp staff. The staff should learn growth and development characteristics of the age group in which they are working to be able to help the child in an age-appropriate manner. During staff orientation, offer some of the following interventions.

- Help your campers adapt to the camp environment and camp routine. Don't ignore the child who has been to camp before. A camper who has been to camp before remembers how it was last year and this year will be different. The camper will have to adjust to a new cabin, new counselors, and new bunkmates.
- Review daily camp schedules and tell campers what is going to happen next. Children thrive on routine.
- Acknowledge and validate campers' feelings. Children need permission to express their feelings. It is okay to talk about home, Mom, Dad, and family. Often, staff think if the subject of home is not addressed, a child will not think about it. Instead, the child internalizes the feelings and this often makes the situation worse.
- Conduct a group discussion or bunk meeting on the normal feelings everyone has when coming to camp. Address how the campers felt when they had other separation experiences, for example going to a new school, staying alone at home, etc.
- Encourage the campers to take one day at a time. Predict success, even if it is short term, and review the progress each camper is making.
- Advise campers to write home. Tell the family how they are feeling and what progress they are making.
- Learn something special about each camper and integrate the subject or the camper's special talent into a camp activity.
- Homesick feelings are more prevalent during meals, free time, rest period, and at night. These are the most important times for staff to be available to campers. Homesick feelings might reappear during religious services; when it is the child's birthday or birthday of a family member; if the child hasn't received mail and other campers have; after visiting day; and on holidays.
- Do not ignore a child's physical complaints. When stressed, a child's body reacts in a variety of ways: increased stomach acid can cause stomach aches; muscle tightness might cause body aches; and headaches might result from crying. Somatic complaints should be evaluated by the camp nurse.

Develop a plan

Even after preparing the child, parents and staff for camp, a few campers might have a more difficult adjustment than others. The third step, if this should occur, is to work out a care plan for the camper.

Encourage counselors to ask for help or to meet with other camper personnel (unit head, camp nurse, assistant camp director, director) to problem solve. Acquire information about the camper such as the child's behavior at camp, new and old friends, likes and dislikes, and the child's home situation. It may be necessary to contact parents for suggestions. The plan can involve the intervention of one person, who takes special interest in the camper's welfare, or it can involve many other staff members. Special care must be given not to alienate the child from the other campers.

Follow-up

The last and very important step in supporting the growth and development of campers is follow-up.

At the end of the session, the camp director, counselor, or unit head should praise the child for being at camp, learning new skills, and being able to take care of him/herself. This is how the child grows, gains new insights, and learns to cope successfully with the separation from home/family.

For many children, going away to camp is the first and longest time they will be away from home. It is their introduction into a social structure that is not home, not family, and not school. They are going out into an unfamiliar world, entrusted to unfamiliar adults. It's often parents' first time letting their child go so far away from home alone. Camp staff can help children and parents adjust, grow, and gain from this special and positive camp experience.

Suggestions for dealing with homesick campers

- Talk about home.
 - What do they like to do? Try to plan that into your day tomorrow – get them excited about the next day.
 - Find out what exactly they're missing from home.
 - Maybe they have a special stuffed animal, or toothbrush, or pillow that they forgot at home – that's fixable! Maybe they have a favorite dog at home that they miss, and they could hang out with Hatley and Luther, etc.
- Give them a goal.
 - Sometimes thinking about staying at camp for a whole week is very overwhelming and seems impossible. If you break the week into sections, the camper only has to think about one day or activity at a time.
 - Give them a check in time, but make sure the check in is at a time that is very fun. Stay away from checking in with them during meals, during turtle time, or before bedtime. Those are times that are hardest on homesick campers.
 - Give them a schedule of the day so that they can mark things off as you go through the day.
- Keep them moving – they feel most homesick when they have downtime. Keep them involved!
- Help them write a letter to their family telling them about their time at camp.
- Find out if they have a brother/sister or a youth director at camp that could give you some suggestions on how to deal with their homesickness.
- Find them a special buddy
 - Have another member of staff sit with them at meals and join you for bible study, etc. If there's a staff member they remember from last year, or someone from their home church that would work the best.
- Talk to other staff members – they might have suggestions for you.
- Rally your other campers to help the homesick one(s) – that gives your other campers a special task that makes them feel special, and will help the homesick one(s) as well.
- NEVER ever promise to call home or to let them go home. Ask Matt and/or Sara for suggestions.
- At the end of the week, praise them for overcoming their homesickness – empower them!