

Homesickness Prevention

What is homesickness? Technically speaking, it is the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home. It's characterized by acute longing and preoccupying thoughts of home and other beloved objects. About 95% of all children miss something about home when they're away at Camp. In other words, homesick feelings are absolutely normal. Contrary to "conventional wisdom," research has shown that a Camp's physical distance from a child's home, or the presence of a child's friend from home at Camp, have no impact at all on whether a child experiences homesickness while at camp.

Fortunately, severe homesickness is very rare. Research has shown that only 1 in 5 children has a bothersome amount of homesickness, and only about 1 in 14 has a truly distressing degree of homesickness. At Camp Winnebago, we believe our numbers are even better. While practical experience has helped us to develop a number of truly effective ways to deal with homesickness at Camp, there are some simple things that you can do before Camp starts to reduce the chance that your child will experience a bothersome or distressing amount of homesickness. In addition, there are lots of things that you can do to support your child if he or she should experience serious homesickness while at Camp.

Prior to the start of Camp, talk with your child about homesickness. Most children are pretty good at predicting how strong their own homesick feelings will be, and talking about homesickness won't cause it, or make it worse. Let your child know that there might be times when he will feel a little homesick, even though he is having a great time at Camp. Let him know that there are lots of things to think about or do to feel better if he feels homesick. Many kids have found that the following things help to reduce homesickness at camp:

Preparing For Camp

- ✓ **Do Something fun** – staying busy at Camp, in activities or with friends in between activities, makes a huge difference.
- ✓ **Do something to feel closer to home** – writing letters to family, looking at pictures, reading letters, all have made kids feel better at Camp.
- ✓ **Think about the good side of being at Camp** – looking on the bright side makes a huge difference. Think of all the cool things you can do at Camp, things that you can't do at home!
- ✓ **Try to be happy and have fun** – try to change the way that you feel...sometimes just thinking about feeling good is enough to change your mood.
- ✓ **Remind yourself that Camp isn't really that long** – seven weeks isn't really that long a time...school lasts about 40 weeks! Remembering how short Camp really is can make a huge difference.
- ✓ **Talk with someone who can help you feel better** – at Camp, there are many people around you who are there for support. Talk to your prefect, your counselors, or your directors. They are there to help you through tough times and they are experts at helping kids get over their homesickness!

Talking about these coping strategies and working on them with your child are great ways to diminish the chances that your child will have significant homesickness while at Camp. In particular, help your child to work on re-framing time, one of the most effective strategies we use at Camp. Arrange for your child to have practice time away from home, at friends' houses for sleepovers, school trips, or other opportunities to be away from home without you. The key during the dress rehearsals is to simulate, as much as possible, the Camp separation. This means no talking on the phone in the middle of the evening – that would not be the true Camp experience. A few more pre-Camp tips:

- ✓ **If possible, avoid moving in the weeks before or during Camp** – it increases a child's anxiety, and makes the adjustment to Camp much more challenging.
- ✓ **Be truthful about stressful issues** – despite what I said above, hiding a move or separation from your child, and doing it behind his/her back while at Camp, can be devastating. When children return home,

and are confronted with a new situation, they can become mistrustful of their parents and fearful of spending time away from home.

- ✓ **Keep doubts to yourself** – again, despite what I just said, try not to say things that will make your child worry about how you'll feel when he's away at Camp. If you are uncertain about your child's ability to cope with homesickness, it is also best to keep those concerns among your child's adult caregivers, including our staff. Children need to hear positive messages from their parents. If you let them know that you believe they can do it, they'll be much more likely to succeed.
- ✓ **Send your child a letter at Camp before the first day** – receiving mail at Camp helps children to feel loved and remembered. Personal, positive letters from home are often the cure for almost any illness.
- ✓ **Do not make deals about early pick-ups!** Parents occasionally make pick-up deals in an innocent attempt to reduce pre-camp anxiety. Experience teaches us that this is a very destructive strategy. It's normal for children to feel nervous and excited as Camp approaches. Second thoughts are common. It is normal for first-year campers to be worried about homesickness and ask themselves whether Camp is such a good idea in the first place. Unfortunately, some well-meaning parents have tried to comfort their child by saying something like, "Well, if you still feel homesick after a week, we'll come to Camp and pick you up." This promise almost guarantees that the child will be homesick, and that the parent will be forced to fulfill the promise. What's worse, the child will not gain independence or self-confidence, but may even feel like a failure.

There are two reasons why ***pick up deals usually backfire***. First, the deal contains a negative message. The message is "Mom and Dad don't think you can make it through Camp. We think you will be so homesick that the only solution will be to leave Camp." The second reason these deals backfire is they give children a powerful, home-related thought to dwell on: The Pick-Up. Then, every time the child encounters a stressful situation at Camp, or feels a twinge of homesickness, his thoughts turn to the pick-up. "My parents said that if I don't like Camp, they'd come to pick me up." This thought becomes a mental crutch. The child leans on it, rather than his or her own developing power to cope.

If your child asks you straight out, "Mom, will you come pick me up if I get really homesick and hate Camp?" the best answer is something like, "You sound a little nervous about going to Camp. But I think you're really going to love it. It's normal to feel nervous before you go. Also, remember that even if you do have some homesick feelings at Camp, you'll know what to think and do to make things better, and you'll have lots of people who can help you through those feelings. So, even though you might have some homesick feelings, I think you're going to have a great time at Camp."

Learning to cope with homesickness is a skill your child can use the next time he's away from home. Once children recognize the feeling of homesickness, cope with it, and survive a brief separation from home, their confidence about future separations skyrockets. They really do gain independence, and their self-confidence shapes their attitudes on an on-going basis. Having a confident, positive attitude is one of the best predictors of having a good time at Camp. In a way, the cure for homesickness is actually overcoming an initial bout of homesickness. It's like exercise. It may hurt a little, but it makes you stronger.