

"Help, I'm HOMESICK"

Most of the time when children go away to sleep-away camp they do not expect to be homesick, but occasionally after a day or so it sinks in that I'm not going home for several more days. Fortunately, a discussion with the counselor or director often helps to defuse the anxiety. Letters from home also help.

Children of almost any age who go to sleep-away camp feel pangs of homesickness. The first time away can be very difficult. Here's how parents can help their kids prepare for and overcome those feelings.

Be positive before camp starts.

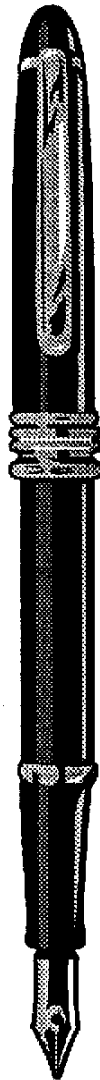
Parents sometimes reassure a hesitant child by saying "Try it and if you don't like it, you can come home." Homesickness is usually less about missing Mom and Dad than about missing the feelings of love and security that a child gets at home -- and it takes a while to establish those bonds at camp. By suggesting a tryout period, you may inadvertently sabotage the process.

A better message might be to say "I believe in you and know that you can ultimately enjoy camp." Also, relate your own experiences of overcoming homesickness, and suggest ways to cope, such as talking things out with a friend or counselor.

Don't overreact to an unhappy call or letter.

There can be instant panic when the first imploring letter arrives. "Come and get me! I hate it here." But resist the urge to jump in the car and rescue your child.

It's natural to feel helpless when your child seems miserable, but if you feel he's in good hands, take comfort that by the time you get the letter, the problem has most likely been rectified.



Write Upbeat Letters

The best letters from parents reiterate that you believe your child can succeed on her own. Keep your news upbeat, but don't make it sound as though she's missing out on all kinds of fun at home.

Parents should make sure letters are waiting for their child when she arrives, and then write often. But no matter how much you miss your child, don't overemphasize these feelings. Instead, focus on the experiences she is having at camp and how proud you are of her. Let your child know that things are fine at home, without stressing her absence.

Don't go overboard with packages.

Appropriate packages include any small items that relate to the child's experience at camp, such as an extra flashlight. Avoid sending food.

Keeping "care" packages to a minimum is best. The overall message to your child should be that camp is your gift. More warmth is shared through a letter containing genuine words of encouragement and heartfelt expressions of love than through material things.

F O R U N H A P P Y C A M P E R S

Occasionally, a child becomes debilitated by homesickness. He doesn't want to wake up, get dressed, eat, etc. When this happens a reassuring phone call from a parent may help. If this happens the camp director will call and talk to the parents first and then have the camper talk to the parents. Some kids don't do well at sleep-away camp. If the situation can't be resolved, cutting short the child's stay at camp may be the best option.