

Facing Forward



A B O U T F A C E

Let's Talk About Homesickness! by Colleen Wheatley MSW, RSW

...continued from front page

For many of our campers, Camp Trailblazers is the first time they are away from home for several days at a time. This means that one of the common concerns we hear from parents is “what if they get homesick?” The bad news is that it is normal for campers to experience homesickness at camp, the good news is that in the majority of cases (80%) or children experience low levels of homesickness that remains low throughout their time at camp and does not have a negative impact on their experience.¹ Even more good news, is that there are steps we can take to decrease the level of homesickness in campers.



Homesickness is the distress and functional impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home and attachment objects such as family members (includes parents, siblings and pets) and in some cases items such as video game systems, phones etc.² Homesickness can often be disguised as other behaviour issues such as isolating oneself or acting out. Therefore the best way to determine if a child is homesick is to simply ask, “How homesick have you been feeling?” It has been found that homesickness does not disappear on its own and that checking in does not worsen the symptoms, but instead helps adults understand the camper’s experience and current state of mind.³

It has been found that there are a few major risk factors for homesickness. The first one is the experience of campers. If campers are young or have little experience away from home they can be more likely to experience homesickness. A camper’s attitude towards the experience at camp can also have an impact on the experience. Other factors include personality, such as a perception of low control and relationship with other family members. Family members actually have a huge impact on a camper’s experience and caregivers should be aware of the impact their attitude has on campers regarding anxiety or ambivalence about the separation.

There are a few things that you and your child can do to reduce your child’s possible homesickness. Read below for some great tips and some things to avoid.





12 TIPS for Prevention of Homesickness:

1. Involve campers in the decision to attend Camp Trailblazers. Taking part of the smallest decisions like what to pack, can increase a camper's perception of control which will decrease the risk of homesickness.
2. Educate campers to understand that homesickness is normal, and everyone misses something about home when they are away. Share the good news that there are strategies you can try to minimize the effect of it.
3. Arrange for practice time away from home such as a sleep over with a friend or relative.
4. If possible check out the new environment. While this might not be an option you can always go on the AboutFace Facebook page or website to check out photos of your child's specific camp.
5. Encourage them to make new friends and try new things.
6. Encourage them to let volunteers and staff know if they are feeling homesick.
7. Practice basic correspondence (go back to the time before cell phones). You can write them letters and ask that they write you letters telling them what they are up to at camp.
8. Maintain predictability and perspective about the time away. Calendars are a great tool, that can show how quickly time before camp will go. They can also be used at camp as a check off list when each day is done.²
9. Encourage your camper to do fun things at camp. Distraction and social connections can help forget about homesick feelings.
10. Write a letter, bring a stuffed animal, a photo something to feel closer to home while at camp.
11. Think about how quickly the few days at Camp Trailblazers will go by and all of the fun activities taking place.
12. Think about what loved ones would say to help with your homesickness.

Strategies for Campers to Avoid

1. Doing nothing. Don't just ignore the issue because you believe nothing can help make things better (relinquishing control)
2. Wishful thinking i.e. "I wish camp was over."
3. Doing something angry or mean to get sent home earlier.
4. *Parents should not ever make a 'pick up' deal with their camper. This reduces your child's likelihood success for several reasons. It demonstrates a lack of confidence in success and that the only solution is for your camper to be rescued by yourself.

Leaving home is a universal developmental milestone. Camp Trailblazers is an opportunity for your camper to challenge themselves in a safe and supported environment. They will have successes, and they might have some failures, but the important value to learn is to try again and develop resilience that can be used later on in life during challenging times. ²

Facing Forward



A B O U T F A C E

References:

1. Thurber CA. Multimodal homesickness prevention in boys spending two weeks at a residential summer camp. *J Consult Clin Psychol.* 2005;73:355-560.
2. Thuber CA, Walton E and the Council on School Health. Preventing and Treating Homesickness. *American Academy of Pediatrics.* 2007; 119:1-11.
3. Thurber CA. The phenomenology of homesickness in boys. *J Abnorm Child Psychol.* 1999;26:125-139

Resources (lots of resources available online)

<http://www.campparents.org/homesickness>

<http://campspirit.com/families/>

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/homesickness.html