

Will Your Daughter be Homesick this Summer?

Do you dread getting a tear-spotted letter from your homesick daughter? The odds are that both you and your daughter have given homesickness some thought, even if you haven't talked about it.

Both first-time and veteran campers can feel homesick. Because we care deeply for your daughters, we take homesickness very seriously. Psychologists define homesickness as "*the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home*". For children, it is a powerful longing for and preoccupying attachment to home. Symptoms may include depression, withdrawal and anxiety; for some, sleeplessness or "acting-out" may also appear.

The specific causes of homesickness differ from child to child. Some general factors do exist, including experience, personality, family environment and attitude. Both younger campers in their first season at camp and older first-time campers having little previous separation experience are susceptible to homesickness. So too are children with low self-esteem and those suffering from some form of juvenile depression.

Family influence is a powerful factor; any negative messages from parents can predispose a child to homesickness. Allowing an "out-card" ("Honey, if you don't like camp, we'll come and get you") gives kids permission to opt out. (Please DO NOT tell your child that you will come and get her if she does not like camp). So too can a family argument, separation, divorce or other negative event adversely influence a child about to leave home. A child's attitude is often a primary factor in homesickness. If a child has low or unrealistic expectations about camp life, those feelings can be destructive.

The good news is that homesickness is curable; by working together, we can prepare your daughter to have a successful experience at camp AND to develop, practice and learn useful coping skills. Your task is to prepare your daughter for camp, while ours is to intervene if homesickness appears.

Here are some questions to consider in preparing your daughter for success at camp: does she feel capable of tackling new situations? Is she comfortable when she spends time away from home or with new kids? How does she deal with problems when they come up?

As with any life skill, practice helps! Encourage your daughter to sleep over at a friend's house. If there have been any problems at home or at school, take the time to process those events so your daughter can feel some closure with them before she travels to camp. If the issue seems bigger than your daughter can handle with your help alone, then by all means enlist the support of a professional.

Each bit of enthusiasm for your daughter's summer at Birch Trail and each positive statement you make will create an environment for success in your daughter. Talk about all the great things she'll be able to do at camp and about all the new friends she'll make. Avoid saying how much you'll miss her, that the house will be empty without her or that you'll come to camp and take her home if she's not happy.

All of these steps will help your daughter to successfully manage her transition from home to camp. We'll work with your daughters if they feel homesick at camp, using the same positive imaging statements, and helping them to develop stronger, more successful coping skills.

Homesickness is normal: it is seldom long lasting, and some very positive things can result from its demise. Taken from a developmental perspective, it gives children an opportunity to develop the skills they will need to cope with these and other negative feelings. This growth comes at a different rate for each child; it is not always immediate and rarely is it pain-free. It can be hard for us as parents to know our kids are homesick, and our natural urge is to intervene. The problem is that our intervention erases the opportunity for their growth.

A camp experience offers many lessons: how to paddle a canoe, how to live with others and how to recognize and deal with your feelings. This is a valuable lesson—and what better place to learn it than in an environment of caring and nurturing? If we form an alliance for the benefit of your daughter, we can give her a solid platform from which she can acquire these skills on her own, master them and gain a feeling of self-confidence and self-worth in the process.

Campingly Yours,
Barbara, Gabe & LBD