

Homesickness 101

(adapted from Lake Geneva Youth Camp materials)

Think about it. Within a couple of hours, Sam pulls up stakes & leaves his race car bed, personalized bedroom, his annoying little sister, his parents, the dog he loves to chase, his favorite bike that he loves riding, & his buddies that he rides with. Susie leaves behind her pretty bedroom, her parents, & her younger brother that she helps care for, her friends to chat with, her house & its chores. Then, their parents drive them to an unfamiliar place where they will live with nine to eleven other boys or girls & one or two counselors in the same room with the same bathroom with few personal &/or familiar belongings, decorations, & friendships/relationships. Adjusting to new surroundings & routines can be quite traumatic initially.

Get the Facts:

- Homesickness is more common than athlete's foot, stomachaches, & coughs combined. (www.floweressencemagazine.com)
- Nearly 95% of 316 boys attending a summer camp reported at least some degree of homesickness. About 18% had a moderate to high level & 7% experienced severe depression & anxiety. (www.cravenhealthcare.org/teentalk.html)
- One study reported that 83% of children attending a sleep-away camp experienced at least mild homesickness. (www.kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/homesickness.html)
- Most campers experiencing homesickness will feel much better within a day or two.
- Most children experiencing homesickness are still having a positive experience at camp, probably happy about 90% of the day! Yet, they will write home when they feel sad.
- Missing home doesn't mean they can't enjoy their time away. Older children better understand this.
- Overcoming homesickness can bring about positive results: feelings of competence, increased independence, improved problem-solving, social adjustments to new & different people, responsibility, & new skills to increase self-esteem.

Prevention:

- Have a welcome cabin atmosphere: bed nametags, posters or cabin décor, greeting campers personally as they enter, write or draw with chalk on the floor (easily swept up).
- Assist your campers to get to know each other & you (likes, dislikes, personality, talents). (Ask the same question to all of them so they come to realize similarities they have with other cabin mates.)
- Help familiarize campers with the surroundings (building, people, etc.)
- Raise their comfort level by informing the campers of the general schedule (so they know what to expect).

Establish ground rules:

- Communicate them so that everyone knows what to expect & what consequences follow when the norms are broken (make sure you stick with what you say).
- Predictability in schedule & behavioral consequences (positive & negative) assist comfort.
- Keep them busy during down times. During cabin time, help them with memory work (make it fun if it's hard), play some quiet games, write a group letter that you can copy & mail home to parents.

Symptoms (what does it look like?):

- Sad or depressed mood
- Crying
- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Attention-seeking behavior (getting into trouble, fighting)
- Unwillingness to participate in activities
- Daily talk about running away or wanting to go home
- Withdrawal from others
- Bed-wetting
- Physical ailments: stomachache, sore throat, headache, nausea, minor aches & pains, flu-like symptoms.

Causes:

- Personality (anxiety, depression insecurity)
- Attitude (low expectations of camp)
- Family factors (discord or divorce, illness, recent death, move, forced to come to camp)
- Little or no previous separation from parents (separation from a parent or parents is one of the strongest fears in childhood)
- Adolescents may miss their girlfriends & boyfriends back home

- Unpleasant social incident at camp or some other negative experience
- Down times during the camp schedule: early morning, cabin time, free time, before bed, even chapel (possibly due to conviction as well)

How to help:

- Listen to & understand feelings for a brief limited time. (Ex. It's scary to wake up in a new place.... When I went to college for the first time I was homesick too!)
- Possibly pray BRIEFLY. Sometimes that is enough.
- Keep them active, successful, & interested in some phase of camp life.
- Give the camper a specific role to aid in participation (cheer during a game, pass equipment to next person).
- Provide social support. Help them to get to know others/make friends, such as pairing him/her with a camper without a friend.
- Assist the camper to write a letter home. The counselor involved needs to encourage him to write things he is enjoying at camp, rather than a letter full of the present, momentary misery he is feeling.
- Help the child to think positively. Talk with him about what is going well at CAMP.
- Set attainable goals (i.e. agreement to stop crying until dinner time, the camper to remember three times during the day that he smiles & tell you later)
- Give the camper a little extra TLC (time & attention). For example, spend some 1-on-1 time with the camper (& another camper as well—to assist socially) during free time at a camp activity of interest (crafts, nature, swimming, play catch, etc.)
- Don't make promises that you can't keep. (i.e. Since calling home often makes the situation worse, don't tell them they can make a phone call home. Instead, do something positive if the child can go without crying for a day or several hours, depending on child needs.)
- Share your stuffed animal for the week, a funny story about you as a camper, or a secret that helped you not feel homesick. Also, have the camper share about school, sports team, etc. Keep them talking & thinking about anything & show interest in them.
- Make your camp director aware so he can keep an eye on the camper & seek positive interactions with him.
- Try to identify & solve any underlying problems (being teased, etc.) or help him learn to live with the insoluble ones (raining, cold water, hot cabin, etc.).
- Read a bedtime story, sing quietly, etc. as they go to sleep to help distract, yet also provide a nurturing & personal routine.

To Summarize:

1. Acknowledge the feeling:

- It's scary to wake up in a new place.
- I feel badly that you feel like this.
- It's not easy being away from home.

2. Share your feelings:

- "I know how you feel, when I went to college for the first time...."

3. Clarify the real issue:

- What is it that bothers you most?
- (If scared of the dark) Do you think a flashlight would help you?
- Have you tried to make friends?

4. Reassure them:

- I think you're a neat kid.
- I know you can get through this.
- I like you already & I've only just met you.
- You & I are going to be special friends.

5. Predict:

- Won't it be great when you get through this?
- You will be so proud of yourself.