

HOW TO HELP THE HOMESICK CHILD

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Camp offers children an ideal opportunity to find out how well they can manage without their parents. Yet for many, leaving home is not a pleasant experience. It fills them with dread and anxiety and they complain of being homesick.

It's important for parents to understand that homesick children feel frightened, lonely and abandoned. They suffer real pain, which is persistent and is usually localized in the pit of the stomach. They feel nauseated and have difficulty keeping food down. Some complain of severe headaches. Their suffering seems to increase at night and their only concern is getting rid of the pain.

Unaware that it is a lack of self-confidence that makes them feel so anxious, they insist on going home to their parents because they know that at home their pain disappears.

Children who are homesick suffer guilt and anxiety. They're anxious because they feel that without a parent's presence they cannot possibly survive. And guilty because they left their parents and are not sure their parents can survive without them.

They're unaware that their homesickness is a distortion of a need. They think that they still need a mother to do for them what they don't think they can do for themselves, provide care and protection and solve their problems. Unfortunately many mothers are unaware that their helpfulness often can make a child feel helpless and their competence can make a child feel incompetent.

Despite the best of intentions, a mother can send her children the message that without her they can't cope. The more her involvement in her children's lives both in school and out, the greater their dependency. And dependency breeds hostility. Children who are homesick are full of rage. They are angry with themselves for missing their mother so painfully and angry with their mother for not being there with them.

They write heart-breaking letters begging their parents to let them come home, as 10-year-old Suzie did:

"Dear Mom and Dad: I hate it here. Please let me come home. I won't take any allowance for 15 years to pay you back. I can't last even a week. Every night I start to cry. I can't fall asleep without a kiss from you all. I threw up today and I went to the infirmary. I don't know hardly anyone and I'm so homesick I'm about to die. Please come and get me."

Love Suzie

How is a parent to respond? The way Suzie's mother did, by giving her daughter confidence in her ability to cope!

"Dear Suzie: We read your letter and we're impressed by how clearly you stated your feelings. We know that it's not easy for you. You miss us very much and wish you were home. We love you, too and have faith in your ability to make a good summer for yourself. We are looking forward to talking to you soon. Is there anything you want us to bring when we come to pick you up?"

Love, Mommy and Daddy

Children need parents who understand their predicament, acknowledge their feelings and help them feel capable. It is not helpful to argue, coax or cajole. It only encourages children to manipulate their parents.

Nor does a child feel better to be told: "We miss you too. The house is empty without you." The words may be sincere, but what a child needs is a show of parental strength, It's not reassuring or comforting to read that parents are lonely, too. It does not make a child feel more loved, only guilty.

Most children feel better at camp as time goes on and they become more familiar with campers and counselors, get involved in activities and discover not only that they are quite capable but that there are other adults who care for their welfare.

When this happens they stop feeling alone and helpless, and start to enjoy the rest of the camp season.