

When a child is homesick at camp

Within a few weeks thousands of parents (across the nation) will receive a tear-stained letter or a telephone call from a small, choked-up voice saying something like this: "I'm miserable. Everyone at camp hates me. I want to come home!"

Yet not all children are homesick the first time they're away from their families for more than a few hours, or at most a few days. The way a child is prepared for a first summer at camp may be more important than the child's personality or even her age in determining whether she'll be homesick, say psychologists. In most cases a child's homesickness can be prevented or, at the very least, reduced if parents take a few simple steps in the weeks before camp starts.

"The more a child knows about a camp before she goes, the more likely she'll adjust well," said Dr. Bruce Muchnick, a psychologist in Philadelphia who has been consulting with summer camps for 11 years.

Go over the daily schedule with a first time camper. Knowing a few details of what to expect every day, like what time mail from home is delivered and that there is a campfire every night, gives the child a sense of control during her first few days at camp. This sense of control lowers the likelihood of homesickness.

Seeing some familiar faces on the first day away from home can ease the transition. However, if she is "going to camp alone", camp is structured to help your child make friends quickly. Arrange for get-togethers with nearby families whose children go to camp.

A new camper who has never spent time in the country can have some very frightening fantasies about the hidden dangers of summer camp.

To an 8-year-old, the woods of Alabama might be filled with dangerous wild animals. The small river nearby might harbor a distant relative of Jaws. Scary campfire stories the child may have heard from older children who've come back from camp or scouting trips don't help the situation. RIVERVIEW STAFF/CAMPERS DO NOT TELL SCARY CAMPFIRE STORIES AND DISCOURAGES CAMPERS FROM TELLING THEM AT OTHER TIMES. Ask the child about the animals and people she pictures living in the woods and river, and reassure her without belittling her fears. Talk to her about how the chirping of crickets is a normal part of nighttime "music" at camp.

Although you should talk to the child about what homesickness might feel like, be sure to explain that it goes away quickly. Staying involved in all events and activities is the best thing a child can do!

"Talking about it can inoculate your child against becoming homesick," advised Dr. Hugh Leichtman, a clinical psychologist and camp director in Boston. Feelings of longing are much less disturbing if the child knows they're normal and don't mean something is wrong with her.

Examine your own feeling about your child's leaving for the summer.

"Homesickness is as much a parent's problem as it is a child's problem," said Bob Ditter, a social worker and former camp director. "If the parents have concerns about the child going away, they send cues to the child. The child always wants to accommodate her parents' secret wishes." Let your child know that even though you'll miss her, you expect her to have a good time."

Talk to your child about the successes she will have at camp, but be careful not to put pressure on her to perform to a certain standard. It's often better to say "Won't it be great when you can show us all around and introduce us to the people you've met" than "You'll be able to show us how you've learned to ride a horse." If the child is nervous about meeting your expectations, she'll have much trouble adjusting to camp. As the departure day approaches, some children start saying they don't want to go to camp after all. Often a child's nervousness about leaving home may mask a larger concern the child is embarrassed or afraid to discuss unless a parent brings up the topic.

"One of the big issues for children is a fear that they will be humiliated or put down by people they don't know." Said Mr. Ditter. Talk to the child about the successes she has had in other new situations like going to a new school or joining the Girl Scouts. Two final techniques can help lower the likelihood or the severity of homesickness.

Have a letter from you waiting for your child when she arrives at camp. Leave it at the front desk or mail drop on opening day. In it, encourage her and let her know how often you'll write or email.

Also, don't buy an all-new wardrobe for your child. The memories stored in an old pair of jeans or a T-shirt with a grape-juice stain from a family picnic can help a child face and overcome her fears.