

Prescription for Camper Homesickness

This summer, millions of children will get their first taste of independence at a summer resident camp. For many, it will also be their first experience with homesickness. But parents don't have to feel helpless when homesickness strikes. The prescription for camper homesickness is a simple solution of preparation and patience. University of California Psychologist Chris Thurber studied homesickness in 329 boys between the ages of 8 and 16 at resident camp. According to his results, homesickness is the norm rather than the exception. A whopping 83 percent of the campers studied reported homesickness on at least one day of camp.

Thurber and the American Camping Association (ACA) suggest the following tips for parents to help their child deal with homesickness at camp:

- Encourage your child's independence throughout the year. Practice separations, such as sleep-overs at a friend's house, can simulate the camp environment.
- Discuss what camp will be like before your child leaves. Consider role-playing anticipated situations, such as using a flashlight to find the bathroom.
- Reach an agreement ahead of time on calling each other. If your child's camp has a no phone calls policy, honor it.
- Bring notes or care packages (not food) with you when you bring your child to camp to be given to the staff. Acknowledge, in a positive way, that you will miss your child. For example, you can say "I am going to miss you, but I know that you will have a good time at camp."
- Don't bribe. Linking a successful stay at camp to a material object sends the wrong message. The reward should be your child's new found confidence and independence.
- Pack a personal item from home, such as a stuffed animal.
- Resist the temptation to "rescue" your son or daughter from this experience.
- Don't promise to "rescue" your child, offer calm reassurance and put the time frame into perspective. Avoid the temptation to take the child home early.
- Talk candidly with the camp director to obtain his/her perspective on your child's adjustment.
- Don't feel guilty about encouraging your child to stay at camp. For many children, camp is a first step toward independence and plays an important role in their growth and development.
- Consider arranging for a first-time camper to attend with a close friend, relative, or camp "buddy."
- Remind him/her, if necessary, that he/she has made a commitment.
- Support your child's efforts to work out the problems with the help of the camp staff.
- Trust your instincts. While most incidents of homesickness will pass in a day or two, Thurber's research shows that approximately seven percent of the cases are severe. If your child is not eating or sleeping because of anxiety or depression, it is time to go home. However, don't make your child feel like a failure if their stay at camp is cut short. Focus on the positive and encourage your child to try camp again next year.