

## Homesickness is Not a Disease

No parent packs a child off to camp without experiencing a little concern that she might get homesick. When I was a camp counselor years ago, I even had one mother pull me aside and ASSURE me that her child would experience terrible homesickness. (Believe me, he didn't disappoint her.) Though only about one third of campers struggle with significant homesickness, about 80% of kids experience enough feelings of missing home to at least write a pitiful letter or two. How you prepare your child, as well as how you prepare yourself, can make dealing with homesickness not only something manageable, but (and this might come as a surprise to you) an actual benefit to your child.

There are two basic things that we need to give our children as they are growing up. I sometimes call them "Roots" and "Wings." Roots are those grounded, loving experiences that we give our kids to teach them that they are loved and held. We give our children Roots when we tuck them into bed, or nurture them when they are struggling. Every child needs a parent to swoop down sometimes and help rescue them from their struggles. Roots are the warm blankets of life for our kids.

However, if Roots were all we gave our children, they would never leave the nest. We also need to give our children "Wings." Wings are bestowed as we help our children learn to be strong and independent. You can see kids begin seeking Wings as they hit toddler years. All of a sudden all the cuddling and nurture of infancy gets a little boring and they want to start exploring and disagreeing – "No," "Me," and "Mine" become favorite phrases. These children are learning what it means to be on their own.

Experiences like camping are Wings-building adventures for school-age kids. During the elementary school years, children are learning to make sense of school, friends, and activities on their own, apart from their families. The feelings we call homesickness are not some sort of spooky sign of emotional fragility. They are simply the vulnerabilities and fears that come from taking new and challenging steps. Homesick feelings are the growing pains of growing Wings. How a parent encourages a child in the midst of those feelings can be a powerful encouragement in that child's essential development and growth toward being a strong independent person.

In my practice, I often tell parents that a child gets her view of herself from the "eyes of her parents." Children look to us and "read" our eyes to get a sense of how they ought to think about the world and themselves. Your child may communicate to you that they have some apprehension about camp. They may also write you letters disclosing sad, homesick feelings. It is important that their parent's eyes communicate strong, encouraging reassurances to them. This is a time for you as the parent to manage your own fears and feelings of sadness and help your child find her strength, her Wings.

### HOW TO DO IT

Some preparation for dealing with homesickness can take place even before your child leaves home. Resist the temptation to dig for homesick feelings. Statements like, "Are you sure you aren't feeling scared about going off to camp?" should be avoided. The power of suggestion will certainly create a homesickness problem if there isn't one already. Be available to discuss their feelings, but not prying.

Secondly, if your child does anticipate feeling sad while away, help her pack a "bit of home" to take with her: a favorite pillow or animal. Kids are very concrete and a tangible reminder of home can be an anchor for their Roots feelings.

Thirdly, begin at home assuring that they will be able to manage any sad feelings that may arise. Let your "eyes" begin reminding them that they are strong even as they anticipate leaving for camp. One way we can do this is by reframing their sad feelings. "Isn't it great that our family loves each other so much that we miss each other when we are apart? How sad it would be if we didn't. It will be wonderful when we see each other again."

Once at camp, if your child writes of homesick feelings, lovingly acknowledge her sadness and the legitimacy of feeling achy about separation – “We love you and are so sorry that you feel sad sometimes.” Resist the temptation to confess your own sadness (or that of her siblings, the dog, or the mailman.) Just lovingly accept her feelings. Secondly, and more importantly, this is the time to give her Wings – she needs to hear your confidence in her. Tell her that you know she can make sense of those feelings and have a good time at camp – “We love you and are so sorry that you feel sad sometimes, but we also know what a strong, smart girl you are. We know you will make wonderful new friends and will have amazing stories to tell us when you get home.” Some children even need us to assure them that there are no plans to rescue them from camp. Assure your daughter that she can (and must) dive into this experience and make sense of it – and certainly have a great time doing it. When encouraged or even challenged in this way, children are given a powerful, loving gift by their parents: the support to be confident and resourceful individuals.

Many children will be having a blast at camp, but in the quiet times of letter writing they may access the small bit of homesick feelings that lie dormant the rest of the day. One of our children would write sad mournful letters at times, but when we saw the camp pictures on the website, she was constantly surrounded by gleeful friends, appearing in some sort of crazy costume, and obviously blissfully happy. Rest assured that Camp DeSoto is quite familiar with campers experiencing some degree of homesickness and provides a nurturing, empowering environment for your child to grow and thrive. The routine of the day, exciting activities, and a wise nurturing staff will all work to alleviate your child’s anxious homesick feelings. If parents manage their own feelings of anxiety and vulnerability over the fact that their child is having to deal with some challenging emotions, the child will surely rise to the occasion.

Camp DeSoto doesn’t look upon homesick feelings as an emotional problem in children or a symptom of internal fragility. Homesickness is the natural pang of separation that we all feel as we step out on our own. If the goal of parenting is to produce strong, independent adults who value and understand loving relationships with God and with others, then we as parents (and camp leaders) will look for opportunities to help children foster their strength. As we walk alongside our child in her camp experiences, with all the emotions that might entail, her summer at Camp DeSoto can be for her what it has been for thousands of girls over the last 60 years – a landmark for her life as an individual -- a place where she will be, as DeSoto has always declared, Safe, Well, and Happy!



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