

Dealing with Homesickness – From UOCCP Parent Guides

Homesickness is a normal reaction for all of us whenever we leave our homes, no matter what age we are. However, the question remains, “how do we deal with this feeling, and how can we prevent it?” The following section will help prepare the parent and the camper for this very normal feeling of missing home.

“I Wanna Go Home!”

As adults, we may often trivialize the experience that young children go through when they are homesick. Even if we do begin to understand how difficult this may be, we know that our children must at some point leave home without being traumatized. Therefore, we determine that they just have to get through it. While that is often the only way to handle the situation, it would be better if homesickness could be prevented all together. Does this sound too good to be true? Perhaps not.

Dr. Christopher Thurber at UCLA has done extensive research in the area of children’s experiences with homesickness (you guessed it – he was a homesick camper too). He has come up with several suggestions for preventing homesickness before it appears.

Getting Ready for Camp

We all know that getting ready for camp means pulling out the sleeping bag and flashlight, but if you are sending a kid to camp for the first time, there’s a lot of *emotional* prep work that needs to be done as well. Here are three “P’s” of Dr. Thurber’s tips:

1. **Practice:** Don’t let camp be the first time a child is away from home. That would be enough to handle alone, without the fact that it’s at least a week in an unknown place, often hundreds of miles from home. Weekends with grandparents or other family or friends are great “practice runs” even if your child doesn’t realize it. They learn that they can leave home and the world doesn’t fall apart.
2. **Preview:** Part of a child’s preparation is knowing what to expect at camp. If possible, talk with other kids who have been to camp before, ask to see their pictures. Or, you can check out the All Saints Camp website at www.uocofusa.org/institutions/AllSaints/ or the website for the Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry which has information about camp at www.uocofusa.org, Offices of Ministry, Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministry.
3. **Prepare:** Promising your child you’ll bring them home if they don’t have a good time is the same as saying, “If you want to come home, here’s what to do: don’t have a good time.” More than one homesick camper has tried this as their best shot at getting home. Once a child knows they are at camp to stay, they will make the effort to have a good time, but not before. You can always change your mind later, but do your child the favor by **not** letting them in on the option of an early departure. With the “try it for one more day” approach, we find that kids do just that: they stay one day, and then demand that their parents make good on their promise and come pick them up. All kids miss home when they are away (well, OK maybe not the teens). That’s normal. Tell your child that they may feel this way and that it’s OK. Another big help is to let them know that **you** will be OK. Many kids’ homesickness comes from worrying about how their parents are doing at home. Some good intentioned parents tell their kids, “Mommy and Daddy are going to miss you SO MUCH.” Instead of conveying love, it tells the kids you need them at home. Let them know that while you will miss them, you will be happy knowing they are having a great time.

What to Expect

The first few days that a child is away from home, it is normal for him/her to miss home and to adjust to the new environment. Letters that are sent home on the first few days of camp often reflect this, and it is not uncommon for a child to over exaggerate to make the experience seem worse than it is. When a camper does this, they are also testing the parents’ ability to separate from their child. Although it can be difficult for the parent to insist that the child stay at camp, it is very important. For school age children, it is appropriate to help the children deal with frustration, disappointment, conflict, and sadness while still remaining in their situation. When you give your child the confidence to cope

with the difficulties of daily life and the experience of handling an appropriate degree of discomfort, you are also helping him/her to grow to be independent and strong.

Well, We Tried

So, you did all that and still you have a hysterical child calling from the camp director's office? If we at the camp think that an early departure is wise, we will tell you. The call is probably a tactic being used in the camp's treatment of the homesickness. The best thing you can do is support the plan the counselors and director are working on, which will probably include: letting the camper talk about his or her feelings without dwelling on them too long, writing letters and most importantly, keeping them busy. Receiving letters from home will be comforting (you may have to send one before the child leaves to arrive early in the session.) Phone calls usually make homesickness worse, so please refrain from calling the camp except for an emergency. In very rare cases, after some time passes and the child isn't able to deal better with the homesickness, the camp director may suggest an early departure. If that's the case, it will be helpful to reinforce the fact that the child tried in the first place, and leave a door open for next year.

With the right preparation and cooperation between parents and camp staff, your child can gain the invaluable experience of being OK away from home. Children gain independence and self-reliance from their time spent away from home at camp, so we hope that no camper leaves early. While that is going on, parents can enjoy a guilt-free week or two of peace and quiet, knowing their child is taking some great big steps toward growing up.

Tips for Coping with Homesickness at Camp

- If your child wants to talk to you on the phone, we'll talk to you in advance about it. When speaking with your child, offer calm reassurance and love. Avoid the temptation to bring them home early. Let them know it is an important step towards growing up. Speak about the positive aspects of camp.
- Don't feel guilty about encouraging your child to stay at camp. For many children this is the first step toward independence.
- If you receive a letter saying, "I hate camp. I can't sleep. I cried. My counselor hates me," **don't panic**. This is a tactic some campers will use to achieve the ultimate aim of the homesick camper: Getting Home! Rest assured, your child is being loved, fed and cared for in every way. They're just taking a rough but necessary step in the process of growing up. Send reassuring letters to your child, and feel free to call the camp director to obtain his/her observation of your child's adjustment.

Relax!

While your child is at camp, take advantage and enjoy the (temporary) quiet! If you miss your kids, write a letter or two – campers love getting mail! Relax, knowing your children are in good hands.