SOME THOUGHTS ON HOMESICKNESS

Homesickness is either a mild or severe form of anxiety, which can sometimes occur until a child becomes adjusted to the camp surroundings and social environment. It is a very real and natural emotion that can occur in anyone, child, teen, or adult, when they leave familiar people and places for a new adventure. Going away to camp is an experience in separation for parent and child. It is important that both are prepared for it before check-in day.

How can we help campers avoid homesickness?

Before Camp:
First time campers will benefit from having gone on other less threatening experiences away from home such as overnights with grandparents and friends or attending a day camp. Involving your child in as many decisions as possible about camp beforehand can also help. Pack the child's bags with familiar clothing and special mementos. A favorite stuffed animal can be very comforting, even for children who seem to be “beyond” that phase. It can provide a treasured reminder of home.

Talk to your child about the kinds of fun they will have exploring new camp activities and meeting new friends. Families should speak openly about the possibility of homesickness. Discuss what camp will be like well before your child leaves home and discuss any concerns. Don’t tell children up front that you will “rescue” them if they don’t like camp right away. Most homesickness fades away as the child becomes comfortable with their surroundings. Also, for some children overcoming homesickness can be a milestone in their development.

One suggestion is to send an encouraging letter that will be waiting for them when they arrive at camp. Camp Fire Boys and Girls conducted a study which concluded that a written message letting kids know they’re important, loved, and appreciated can make a lasting impact on their lives. Letters should not include any bad news or stories about what the family is doing that may leave the child feeling left out. Also, don't dwell on how much you, the pet, or siblings miss them. It’s not that we want campers to forget about home, we just don’t want them to dwell on home to the exclusion of their current camp experience.

On Check-in Day:
Check-in day can be the most exciting yet the most difficult for both parents and children. On check-in day try not to dwell on the subject of homesickness prior to your arrival at camp. Direct your child towards thinking of the positive things they will be involved in during their stay. After checking in, help them move their gear into their cabin and assist them in organizing their space and meeting their cabin leaders and a few other cabin mates. Try not to linger too long. Once they are settled, it is time to say goodbye. Give words of encouragement, say your good-byes, and leave them to their experience. Some children will jump enthusiastically into the fray. Some will ease in slowly. Some will attempt to make you feel guilty for “abandoning” them. It is all normal behavior. Soon they will be engaged in exciting activities.

During Camp:
Once the camp program is underway, we try to keep campers so busy that they will have little time to reflect on home. Most child psychologists agree that telephone calls to or from home make homesickness much worse or stimulate it in children who are not experiencing homesickness. Because of this, we do not allow campers to call home (except in cases of severe, persistent homesickness). Our approach is to get them involved and engaged as much as possible in what is happening around them. Feel free to call and speak with the camp coordinator at any time if you would like reassurance that your child is OK. They may have to check and get back to you but they will be honest with you about how your child is doing.

Although there are times when sending a child home will be the right choice, children overcome homesickness and adjust to camp within a day or two in the vast majority of cases. At camp, children learn to problem-solve, make social adjustments to new and different people, learn responsibility, and gain new skills to increase their self-esteem. The goal of camp is to provide a safe, fun, and educational experience for children, while assisting their positive growth and development. It would be unfortunate to have a child miss out on developing these life skills because of an early bout with homesickness. With support and encouragement, most children adjust very quickly to their new camp environment.