

## Preventing Homesickness

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

### **“I Wanna Go Home!”**

As adults we often minimize the experience that young children go through when they are homesick. Even if we do begin to understand what a difficult thing it can be, we know that our children must at some point leave home without being traumatized, so we figure they just have to get through it. While that is often the only way to handle it, it would be better if homesickness could be prevented all together. Sound too good to be true? Maybe not....

Dr. Christopher Thurber at UCLA has done extensive research in the area of children’s experience of 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 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 is some emotional prep work that needs to be as well. Here are the 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 and in an unknown place, often hundred of miles from home. Weekends with grandparents or other family or friends are great “practice runs” even if your child doesn’t know it. They learn that they can leave home and the world doesn’t fall apart.
2. **Preview:** Part of a child’s preparation will be to know what to expect at camp. Talks with other campers who have been to camp, seeing their pictures, or checking out the camp website ([www.campstmary.org](http://www.campstmary.org)) to watch videos of previous years.
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 remaining in their situation. When you give your child the confidence to cope and deal with the difficulties of daily life and the experience of handling an appropriate degree of discomfort, it is not only good parenting, but also helps the child to grow to be independent and strong.

### **“Well, We Tried!”**

So, you did all that and still have a hysterical child calling from the camp office? If we at camp think 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 Camp Director are working on, which will probably include: letting the camper talk about his or her feelings without dwelling too long on them, writing letters, and, most importantly, keeping busy. Receiving letter from home will be comforting (you may have to send one before the child leaves in order for the letter to arrive early in the camp session). Phone calls usually make homesickness worse, so please refrain from calling the camp except for an emergency.

With the right preparation and the right cooperation between parents and camp staff, your child can gain the invaluable experience of being OK away from home. Children gain confidence and a sense of healthy independence from their time spent away from home at camp, so we hope that no campers leave early. While that is going on, you as parents can enjoy your week, knowing that your child is in a safe and loving place, taking some great big steps toward growing up.