

Coping with Homesickness

Preventative medicine and tried-and-true remedies

by Christina Smieja

Homesickness is something that every counselor, activity instructor, nurse, administrative staff, and director will deal with at camp. It's an inevitable phenomenon. What are the best ways to deal with homesickness or, more importantly, to prevent the onset?

Prevention Is the Best Medicine

Planning activities that help campers get to know other campers and showing them around the camp grounds helps campers get familiar with the facility and the people and makes them feel more at home. Often such activities can help prevent homesickness.

Break the ice

Ice-breakers and get-to-know-you games provide campers and staff with a way to get to know the likes and dislikes, skills, talents, attitudes, and personalities of the people that they will be spending time with during their stay. One resident camp for girls asks each camper and staff to learn the names of at least seven new people within the first hour of arriving at camp. A director walking by may test staff and campers at any time. Learning names may seem like a simple thing, but when someone calls you by name, you instantly feel like you belong.

Play a lot of these games, and don't stop after the first day. It may take two or three days for your campers to really feel comfortable.

Raise campers' comfort level

Tell campers absolutely everything that they need to know about their camp stay. Tell them about what will happen on the first day, what their daily schedule will be like, when they will have free time, when their bedtime is, what time they have to get up, and when they will take their showers. Make sure to take them on a tour of camp and show them where everything is. Don't forget to show them the location of the nurse, the outgoing mailbox, and any meeting places that you might use during the week.

Establish ground rules

Make sure everyone is on the same page as far as cabin rules, camp rules, acceptable behavior, and what the consequences are if any of these norms are broken. Sometimes having campers come up with some of their own ground rules will raise their comfort level, too.

Keep 'em busy

During down times, campers tend to think about home and focus on the fact that they aren't there. Rest hour, early morning, and before bedtimes are times when campers may get homesick because these are times when they are used to being with their families. Try to keep their minds on other things. Play some quiet games, pass a story around, or write a group letter that you can copy and mail home to parents.

Remedies

What if homesickness strikes despite your attempts to prevent it? There are a couple of things that you need to remember. First, homesickness is highly contagious. It can spread before your eyes. Second, there are

remedies, and many stories of homesick children have happy endings; some campers even want to return to camp next year.

Set goals

If you find yourself with an unhappy camper, one of the keys to curing the ailment is to set attainable goals, both for the camper and for yourself. The goals may be as simple as making an agreement with the camper that he needs to stop crying until dinner time. You may ask a camper to try to remember three times during the day that he smiles and then tell you about these times the next time you meet. The staff member may try setting a goal to continue to encourage the camper and to work on the problem for an entire day before asking for help from another staff member or the camper's parents.

Ask for help

The great thing about working at camp is that you are never alone. Other staff members are there to support you, and they are ready and willing to help. Keep in mind that experienced staff have handled these kinds of problems before, and they might have some good ideas to get your camper through the next hour, day, or week. Sometimes it helps to have someone else in camp who understands the situation and can talk to your homesick camper.

Give a little extra TLC

Homesick campers might just need a little extra care. Spend a little extra time with them or ask the assistant director or other staff member to take a special interest in the camper. At first the camper may cling to this new-found friend, but little by little the camper will become more independent and join in activities with the cabin group.

Don't make promises you can't keep

Kids can be devious when it comes to getting something they want, and counselors must be sure they don't make promises that they can't or aren't willing to keep. Sometimes when you're trying to get a child to stop crying, you may promise a phone call home or something even worse. Remember, your campers' parents or guardians sent them to camp for a reason, and it is best to find out what that reason is before you start making promises. Maybe a mother sent her daughter to camp to become a little more independent; maybe a camper's parents are on an extended vacation in Europe. Call the parents to see what they think before you make any promises.

Share

At times, campers just want to know that they belong. Give them your favorite stuffed animal to borrow while they are at camp. (As a counselor, I used to bring a suitcase full of stuffed animals just for homesick campers.) Share a funny story about when you were a camper, or share a secret that helped you not feel homesick. Have them share some things about their lives, too. Ask them about school or their baseball team or their last dance recital. Keep them talking and thinking about anything, and show interest in them. And sometimes, you just have to share a smile to help your campers feel better.

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