Handling Homesickness

Tips for a Successful Camp Experience!

Summertime is when millions of children get their first taste of independence at sleep-away camp. For many, it will also be their first encounter with homesickness. Luckily, parents don't have to feel helpless when homesickness strikes.

Here's a tried-and-true prescription to combat homesickness and help ensure your child has the experience of a lifetime!

The Do's and Don'ts Before Camp Begins

- ✓ **Do** encourage your child's independence now. Practice separations, like sleepovers at a friend's or relative's house, can simulate the camp experience.
- ✓ **Do** involve your child in the camp selection process. The more a child owns the decision, the more comfortable they will feel at camp.
- ✓ **Do** warn your child against keeping feelings of homesickness to themself and encourage your child to speak with a counselor.
- ✓ **Do** practice writing letters and provide your child with pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes and paper.
- ✓ **Do** try to visit the camp beforehand or attend an online open house and introduce your child to other campers and counselors in advance.
- ✓ **Do** send a piece of home to camp with your child, such as a stuffed animal or a photo.
- ✓ **Do** inform camp staff about your child's medical or emotional needs beforehand, such as allergies, asthma or any required medication for behavioral, attention or psychological conditions. Parents who intensely manage their child's care can have difficulty giving up that control, and children can sense your anxiety.
- ✓ **Do** make a plan for yourself. What do you want to do during your child's time at camp? If you feel nervous, share your anxiety with another adult. Take a deep breath, trust in your decision and remind yourself that you're giving your child an amazing gift.
- ✗ **Don't** use bribery. Linking a successful stay at camp to an outside reward sends the wrong message. The reward should be newfound confidence and independence.
- ✗ **Don't** make comments that express anxiety or uncertainty. Even "What will I do without you" can make your child worried that something bad might happen to you while they are away.
- ✗ **Don't** make a deal or "pick-up plan" with your child to come home early if they don't like being away. This says you lack confidence in your child's ability to be independent and sets an expectation that they won't enjoy the new experience. Picking your child up early is also extremely disruptive to the entire camp community.

The Do's and Don'ts Once Camp Begins

- ✓ **Do** speak candidly with camp staff to obtain their perception of your child's adjustment to camp.
- ✓ **Do** send letters or emails with reassuring words that encourage your child to enjoy camp activities. Sitting on the sidelines will just give your child more time to feel homesick.
- ✓ **Do** resist the urge to "rescue" your child from camp. Instead, offer calm reassurance and put the timeframe into perspective. Again, picking your child up early is also extremely disruptive to the entire camp community.
- ✓ **Do** remember that it's perfectly normal for your child to experience homesickness. Part of a successful camp stay is overcoming challenges to complete the experience. Homesickness will improve as your child adjusts to the new environment and makes new friends.
- ✗ **Don't** write to your child about how much you miss them or go into great detail about what's happening at home. How can a child whose family is missing them so much enjoy camp? They may feel left out of something back at home.
- ✗ **Don't** worry. Homesickness tends to worsen during free time, and these are the same periods that children typically write home. If letters from your child seem sad at times, rest assured that there are positive experiences, as well. Remember, counselors are trained to recognize and handle homesickness, and everyone involved has your child's best interest at heart!

For more information and helpful tips about camp, visit www.ACACamps.org/Parents-Families.