

Bag Bites

and

CAMPFIRES

A Story for Kids About Homesickness



By Frank J. Sileo, Ph.D.

Illustrated by Eric Scott Fisher

Coping with Homesickness

Sleeping bag... check. Bathing suit... check. Change of socks and underwear... check. Homesickness... double check. Every summer more than ten million children go to some type of camp. Of the children attending camp, 95% of them experience some form of homesickness; one in five are bothered by homesickness while one in 14 experience intense homesickness. The good news is that homesickness is preventable and treatable.

Leaving home and separating from parents is a developmental milestone. Whether it involves starting pre-school, going to summer camp, sleeping over at a friend's house, visiting Grandma, a hospital stay or leaving for college, separation experiences can cause varying degrees of anxiety, fear and depression in some individuals. Homesickness—defined as recurrent thoughts focused on “homey” things such as house, parents, pets and home cooking—seems to affect younger children in greater numbers, but there do not seem to be any gender differences in the pervasiveness or intensity of homesickness.

Children who experience feelings of homesickness typically are tearful and withdrawn, and may complain of pains such as stomachaches and headaches. Physical injuries or illnesses may intensify or even bring on feelings of homesickness. Severe homesickness in children is related to social and behavioral problems, as well as feelings of depression, anxiety and helplessness. In academic settings, homesick teenagers at boarding schools or college may experience academic difficulties, absentmindedness, low self-esteem, and/or obsessive thoughts and behaviors.

Prevention

- Involve your children in the decision to be away from home. This is easier for summer camp than it is for hospitalizations. However, we can prepare kids for hospital stays and procedures. When children are involved even in a small way in the decision-making process, they will have increased feelings of control. When children feel forced, homesick feelings will intensify.
- Teach them that homesickness is “normal.” Children often feel they are the only ones experiencing a negative feeling.
- Give them hope. Tell them there are tools to help them if they feel homesick. This will help instill a feeling of confidence in them.
- Organize practice times away from home at the home of a friend or relative. After the practice time away, discuss which coping strategies worked best.
- Work on letter or postcard writing. When your children go to camp, supply them with pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes.



Before they arrive, send a letter to your kids to serve as a reassuring surprise on their first day of camp.

- To help your child become familiar with the new environment, take a tour of the camp, hospital, school or new neighborhood. Utilizing Web sites, pamphlets, catalogs, speaking with alumni and staff members are all additional resources.
- Introduce yourself and your child to people in the environment. We all feel much calmer when there is at least one familiar face in the crowd. That familiar face can be an adult or child.
- Encourage your children to make new friends and seek the support of trusted grownups.
- Avoid making anxious or ambivalent statements to your child about the separation. Giving children something to worry about will only increase thoughts of home. Instead, express enthusiasm, confidence and optimism about the new experience and environment.
- Use a wall calendar to demonstrate perspective on the time away by marking fun activities such as day trip to the amusement park, canoe races, etc.

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Treatment

- Encourage children to do something fun to distract from homesick thoughts. Get them involved in the activities at hand.
- Encourage them to do something—writing a letter or looking at a family picture, for example—that will make them feel closer to home.
- Encourage them to talk with someone to help them feel better.
- Have children think about good things about their new environment (new friends, swimming, campfires). Or have them think good thoughts, listen to pleasant music or encourage them to laugh.

The Pick-Up Deal

Although you might be tempted, never make the “pick-up deal,” since promising this drastically reduces the chances of your child’s success. This conveys to your child that you have little confidence in his or her ability to cope with this “normal” feeling and that the only



solution is to rescue him or her. The deal also plants the seed in your child that he or she will not like the new environment or that there is something to fear and that the only solution is to

engage in avoidance or escape. This also undermines the surrogate caregivers in trying to help your child cope with the feelings of homesickness.

Hard as it may be for you as a parent, the best course of action is to smile, gently let go and follow the advice presented above. Bolstered by your love and support, your child will be just fine. And so will you.

Dr. Frank J. Sileo, a licensed psychologist with a practice in Ridgewood, is the author of *Bug Bites* and *Campfires: A Story for Kids About Homesickness*, a 32-page, illustrated book that helps children cope with homesickness/separation anxiety. He has also written *Toilet Paper Flowers: A Story for Children About Crohn’s Disease* and *Hold the Cheese Please! A Story for Children About Lactose Intolerance*. To learn more, visit www.drfranksileo.com.



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