

ADDRESSING SUMMER CAMP HOMESICKNESS

Dr. Frank Sileo, Guest Specialist

My ten-year-old is going off to camp for the first time this summer. She's a little nervous, but I'm very concerned about her becoming homesick while at camp. She's a homebody and a bit shy about making new friends. When my nephew went off to summer camp a couple of years ago, my sister ended up picking him up before camp was over. I want to avoid that, if at all possible. Any tips or ideas?

If your child is going to sleep-away camp for the first time, they may experience feelings of homesickness, a form of separation anxiety. 95% of all kids experience it. The good news is that homesickness is not only typical, it is treatable and preventable.

Addressing Feelings of Homesickness

Here are a few ideas for addressing and even preventing homesickness when a youngster goes off to summer camp for the first time.

- 1. Involve the child in the decision.** Whenever a youngster is involved in the decision-making process, they will have increased feelings of control about being away from home. When children feel forced, homesick feelings intensify.
- 2. Teach the child that homesickness is typical.** Children often feel they are the only ones to experience these feelings. It can be a big relief for them to know this is not the case.

3. **Give the youngster skills and hope.** Provide them with the tools that will help them if they feel homesick while away. Encourage them not to isolate, but to stay active and be with others, and to talk it out with an adult.

4. **Organize practice times away.** These could include one-night sleepovers with friends or a trip to Grandma's. When they return, encourage them to talk about what coping strategies worked best if they became homesick.

5. **Work with them on letter writing.** Make it really easy for them to stay in touch. Supply them with paper, pens and plenty of pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes.

6. **Send a letter ahead.** Mail a letter to your child before she even goes to camp. That way, when she arrives, it will be a wonderful surprise and a piece of love from home.

7. **Take "tours" of the camp.** Use websites, pamphlets and other materials to help familiarize your child with the camp. Have them speak with camp staff or alumni of the camp. Once they have met someone from the camp, a familiar face can go a long way in helping them feel safe and comfortable.

8. **Encourage friendships.** Suggest that your child actively make new friendships and seek the support of trusted grownups.

9. **Check yourself.** Avoid making anxious or ambivalent statements to your child about the separation from them. Giving children something to worry about will only increase thoughts of home. Express enthusiasm, confidence and optimism about the new experience. If YOU are anxious, your

child will sense it and become anxious, also. Even if you are concerned, act as if you are not!

10. **Use a wall calendar.** Practice perspective on the time away by marking fun activities on a large calendar.

DON'T Make the "Pick-up Deal"

Although you might be tempted, NEVER make the "Pick-up Deal," an offer to pick the child up at camp and bring them home if things don't go well. Making this deal will reduce *dramatically* the chances of your child's success at summer camp. This can convey to your child that you have little confidence in their ability to cope with a typical away-from-home feeling, and that the *only* solution is for you to rescue them. This deal can also plant the seed that your child will not like camp or that there might be something to be afraid of, suggesting that their only solution is to avoid or escape. Additionally, the "deal" undermines the surrogate caregivers (camp staff) who are trying to help your child cope with feelings of homesickness.

Just remember; when you say good-bye to your child on the camp bus, when you are sending them off with your love, support and belief in them, they will do just fine.

And so will you!

Dr. Frank Sileo is a child and adolescent psychologist and the Executive Director of The Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridgewood, New Jersey. He is the author of the children's book, *Bug Bites and Campfires*, a story about a youngster going off to summer camp for the first time. [[website](#)]