

Preventing Homesickness

“I WANNA GO HOME!”

Most people who have ever spent time in summer camp, or even at another home for any extended period of time have felt the awful pit in their stomach of home sickness. It is typically fear of the unknown; unknown surroundings, people, routine.

I can remember the feeling like it was yesterday—the dull pain coming from the hollow pit in my stomach, the overwhelming sense of fear, the terrible feeling that I was lost and alone, even though I knew the people around me. To top it off, I was horrified at the thought that I would feel like this for days on end. That is, of course, unless I could do the one thing that would make it all better—**go home**. When homesick kids tell me, “You don’t understand!” they couldn’t be farther from the truth. I was horribly home sick as a youth, I felt terrified at night in a different surrounding in New Hampshire, I was convinced I wouldn’t make it through the night. To my surprise the next morning, I did. I had fun and each night it got easier. I would be lying if I said it went away totally, but by the end of the week away from home I found a new sense of achievement, I did it. I could be by on my own without my family and function, even have fun and be accomplished. That was a turning point of my youth, I was then able to travel around the country as my Mother worked for the airlines. I frequently travelled alone to relatives homes in Florida and California. The ability to have confidence in ones abilities is a wonderful thing which the Scouting program, and Boy Scout Resident Camp affords our boys. I was not able to have that particular experience but am proud to be part of a program that offers such great opportunities.

As adults we may 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 the 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, or at least minimized in its effect on our kids. 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’s lots of *emotional* prep work that needs to be done as well. Here are 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 in an unknown place, often 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 when they leave home, the world doesn’t fall apart,

and they eventually come home again having enjoyed great experiences. If the Scout has not attended a campout with their unit, camping in a tent with other boys their age, even in the backyard, is very important. If parents wish to be out there with them, that is okay, please set up another tent. The point is for the progression of a family tent to an independent situation, moving to the boys in the backyard by themselves if possible.

2) **Preview:** Part of a child's preparation will be knowing what to expect at camp. Talks with other campers who have been to camp before, seeing their pictures, or showing them pictures of the camp from our website at www.mohegancouncilbsa.org can all help them preview what they will experience.

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.**" I've seen more than one homesick camper trying 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. 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 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.

WELL, WE TRIED

So, you did all that and still you have a hysterical child calling from the camp director's office? If we at the camp think that an early departure is wise, we will tell you. If we do have to call, it's probably a tactic being used in the camp's treatment of the homesickness. The best thing you can do is support the plan the Scout Master and director are working on, which will probably include: letting the Scout talk about his or her feelings without dwelling too long on them, writing letters and, most importantly, keeping busy. Receiving letters from home will be comforting (you may have to send one before the child leaves to arrive early in the session). Phone calls and visits usually make homesickness much worse, so please refrain from calling the Camp except for an emergency or visiting. If some time passes and the child isn't able to deal better with the homesickness, the camp director may suggest an early departure. If that's the case, it will be helpful to reinforce the fact that the child tried in the first place, and leave a door open for next year.

Letters should include positive thoughts such as "we are so excited to hear about the accomplishments of the week, your stories of camp activities, about friends you made, favorite camp memories", etc. The last thing the boys should hear about is the favorite meal they missed, the family pet misses them so much that they won't eat or is sleeping on their bed waiting for their return, you miss them so much, their grandparents visited during their absence, you get the picture. Parents confidence in the Camp Program and Leadership, as well as the confidence in

the Scout that you know they will have fun and do well, is often the most critical piece of a Scout's success. We appreciate your support!

Parents new to this experience are welcomed to contact me to have a tour of our camp during operation on the Friday prior to the week the Troop will arrive. Boy Scout resident camp does not encourage parents to visit during the camp week. However, if a parent has discussed arrival with the Scoutmaster to the unit campsite only, it is very important that Parents and siblings not be visible in the camp proper. They will need to proceed to Magee to check in then go directly to the Unit campsite. A boy's entire week can unravel by seeing parents or a family walking around camp with a Scout. Although your Scout may be fine, others can be negatively impacted resulting in early leave of camp. This also applies to Board of Review members. I thank you in advance for your cooperation on this very sensitive issue. Please feel free to contact me for any questions. Thank you!

Stephanie Keimig
TVSR Boy Scout Resident
Camp Director
skeimig@bsamil.org
Cell 508-479-8724