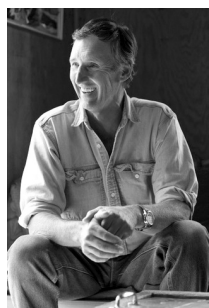


# Dealing with Homesickness

BY JIM WILTENS



## DEER CROSSING



High Sierra Summer Camp  
SINCE 1983

Tears dribbled down 12-year old Melinda's cheeks. "Two weeks is too long," she snuffled. "You have to call my parents and tell them to come get me." Jennifer, Melinda's cabin counselor, was experienced in comforting homesick campers, but in Melinda's case, it would be difficult—because Melinda's loving parents had unwittingly set their daughter up to fail. Homesickness is a challenging emotional experience. These guidelines will help you avoid parent pitfalls that aggravate it and prepare your child to handle this common childhood ailment.

### Let's make a deal

Within minutes of arriving at camp, Melinda was homesick and asked to go home. When Jennifer suggested they give it a day or two, Melinda replied, "My parents said if I didn't like it, they would come get me." To support her claim, she pulled an envelope marked URGENT! from her pocket. The letter inside said Melinda should be sent home if she was homesick, if kids teased her, if she didn't like the food ... It was a long list. Melinda had negotiated for this letter as a condition of going to camp.

"We ask parents not to make a deal with kids in regards to going to camp," said Scott Whipple, owner of Mountain Camp. "Making a deal undermines the process of learning to handle homesickness." Parents make deals in the hope that camp will be so awesome that their child won't experience homesickness. The reality is that camp, as awesome as it can be, represents change: new friends, new food, new place to sleep, new rules, new activities. Change is part of the excitement of going to camp, but it also means that children may need to manage uncomfortable emotions associated with change. If children have a deal, they focus on leaving rather than managing.

### What is homesickness?

Cows and homesick kids have something in common, they ruminate. Rumination means to chew. Cows chew cud, homesick kids chew on what they miss. They miss their parents, they

miss their bed, they miss pets and friends, they miss their toys and TV. By repeatedly chewing on what we lack, negative feelings are amplified. Homesickness is a chance for your child to practice her budding skills of emotional management in a caring camp environment. If you rescue kids, they retain a sense of helplessness when it comes to managing emotions.

### What message are you sending?

"Some parents need to be needed so much, they look for opportunities to rescue their children," said Whipple. "We had a camper who was getting along and making new friends. But before bed, she would begin to miss her family. Within two days of camp, she asked to call her mother. Her mom responded by arriving the next day at 5:00 AM. Parents think they are telling kids they care by coming and picking them up. What they are really saying is, 'You are not able to make it on your own.'"

When a parent receives a sobbing call from camp or a letter pleading to return home, it takes resolve to tell your child, "Honey, I love you. I know that being homesick is hard. I also know you are strong enough to work it out. I'll pick you up—at the end of camp." This kind of resolve requires advanced preparation. Ask your camp about its plan for dealing with homesickness.

### There's a rhythm to homesickness

Homesickness is most likely to occur on the first three days of camp when separation anxiety is the highest, on rest days, and on transition days. One camper wrote home: "I hate it here. All the counselors are jerks. I hate the food. I don't have any friends. There's nothing to do and they make us do chores all day. I just want to come home." The camper's parent called, obviously concerned, to speak to her daughter. Her daughter said, "Oh that was in the beginning. I really like it here now." Parents need to understand that when a child is homesick, everything is gray. This gray is usually temporary.

The arrival of mail can also trigger homesickness. One day at camp, Melinda received a letter

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Photo by Jaime Emery

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from home. She removed a ziplock bag, read the letter, and then hid in her bunk. When Jennifer asked what was in the bag, Melinda held out a hanky scented with her Mom's perfume. "My Mom sent it so I wouldn't forget her," offered a teary Melinda. Writing, "I miss you" or "the house just isn't the same without you" sends a message. Parents think these phrases say that they love their child. With some campers, it contributes to a feeling of guilt, "I'm having a good time without my parents, is that okay?" In letters to campers, it is better to ask, "What activities are you doing?" "Who is your counselor?" Concentrate on the positive aspects of the child's experience.

### Suggestions for managing homesickness

It's natural for some children to feel the emotional pangs that come with separation. When the twinge hits, help your child respond proactively, which leads to greater growth. Talking about homesickness before camp so your children understand how it can make them feel bad means they'll have a better chance of dealing with it. Explain rumination and give it a label. Then tell kids some of the ways they can break the rumination cycle:

1. **Be active.** Children who surrender to homesickness by retreating to their bunk or staying in their cabin all day add to their misery and rumination takes over. Encourage kids to talk about what they are looking forward to like campfire, going fishing, a hike, or earning an award.
2. **Take a break.** "When kids are really tired, they get homesick," said Andrew Townsend, director of Kennolyn. "In this case, they may need a quiet stay for an afternoon in the health cottage with a glass of juice and a good book."
3. **Talk to a counselor.** "We had a young boy," related Townsend, "who refused to participate in activities. I tried to strike up a conversation. It took 25 questions until I asked if he had pets. It turns out that his pet rabbit had gotten lost before camp. He wanted to know if his rabbit had

come home. So we called home. When he knew what was going on, he felt a lot better." Prior to camp, encourage your child to actively seek help if they feel sad. Counselors can more quickly begin helping the child to make friends and get through the homesickness.

### When homesickness is overwhelming

Sometimes homesickness causes debilitating physical symptoms: upset stomach, difficulty sleeping, headaches, and anxiety attacks. Many situations at home can contribute to homesickness stress, such as divorce, serious illness in the family, and moving. On average, many private camps send home one or two children a season due to extreme homesickness. Townsend said, "It's important for parents to realize that there is no incentive for a camp director to pretend that a child is having a great time when they are not." If a camper is really miserable and nothing seems to help, directors will call parents.

By the way, Melinda made it through two weeks at camp. There were some rough spots, but at the end, Melinda said, "I feel pretty good about making it the whole way. I learned something about myself."

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### Are you ready to send your child to overnight camp?

- What are three valuable benefits that your child will get from going to camp?
- Do you feel confident that the camp handles homesickness in a positive way?
- Have you avoided making deals? "We will pick you up if you don't like it." "We will buy you a Nintendo game." "We will send a big care package every day."
- If you get a "rescue me letter," do you have confidence in the camp and your child that he can get through it successfully?
- Have you prepared your child to deal with homesickness by providing suggestions for what she can do?

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