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Unhappy campers

A week away from home can be hard on first-timers

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LONGMONT — At the start of her first weeklong overnight camp, Kristin Fischer tried crying without making a sound.

She sat cross-legged on her bunk that summer in 2006, pining for home and feeling abandoned by her mother.

Many children, especially younger ones on their first extended overnight camp, will naturally suffer some degree of homesickness. Symptoms include crying, lack of participation, lack of appetite and a longing for home.

However, weathering a bout of homesickness could be the best thing a kid takes home from camp.

“It means a lot when we can go into an uncomfortable situation and have success or mastery. It makes us more confident for the next time,” said Stephanie Smith, a licensed psychologist at the Front Range Psychological Association in Erie and the American Psychological Association’s education coordinator in Colorado.

To help the homesick, Maria Shupe, executive director at Highlands Presbyterian Camp & Retreat Center in Allenspark, mixes TLC with tough love.

She met Kristin in the nurse’s station after the girl complained of a headache. That is where most homesick kids wind up, Shupe said.

“I tell the nurse (before camping season opens) that 98 percent of what they will see is homesickness,” she explained. “It might look like a stomachache. But it’s ‘I want a reason to call Mom or Dad.’”

However, indulging a homesick camper with a call home usually makes things worse, Shupe said.

Kristin, now 14, remembers Shupe’s pep talk.

“She said that I could do this, that I could make it through the week. I didn’t really like her then,” Kristin said.

That impression began changing when Shupe spotted Kristin sitting out while her cabin-mates played games.



While attending a summer camp in Allenspark three years ago, Kristin Fischer, 14, became very homesick. With the help of the camp’s executive director, she was able to overcome her fears and survive her week at the camp with flying colors. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

Homesickness helpers

- Encourage your child’s independence throughout the year. Practice separations, such as sleepovers at a friend’s house, can simulate a camp environment.
- Involve your child in choosing a camp. The more that the child owns the decision, the more comfortable he or she will feel at camp.
- Discuss what camp will be like before your child leaves. Consider role-playing anticipated situations, such as using a flashlight to find the bathroom.
- Reach an agreement ahead of time on calling each other. If your child’s camp has a no-phone-calls policy, honor it.
- Send a note or care package ahead of time to arrive the first day of camp. Acknowledge, in a positive way, that you will miss your child. For example, you can say, “I am going to miss you, but I know that you will have a good time at camp.”
- Don’t bribe. Linking a successful

That is when Shupe gave the girl a “lovey” — a stuffed bear with Velcro pads on its paws — to hang around her neck during the day and cuddle in her sleeping bag at night.

The deal was that the homesick camper could keep the lovey if she stayed at camp.

Shupe kept an eye out for the girl all week, she said.

Kristin noticed.

“Whenever I sat down to be sad, she would magically appear,” Kristin said.

Shupe said that’s what it takes to help some campers get into the swing of making friends and having fun.

“It’s not like you can give a child two Tylenol and they will be better in a couple of hours,” she said. “It takes a lot of time and energy from a staff person. They have to engage the child and stay engaged.”

Shupe said Highlands covers homesickness in its two-week counselor training session and stays in close contact with parents throughout the bout.

In some cases, a phone call is allowed. But in these cases, Shupe coaches parents to nix homecoming talk and focus instead on the positive.

“Talk with your child about what they enjoy and like, and tell them to keep at it,” she said.

This strategy gives Highlands a good record. With more than 600 campers participating every summer, none has gone home early.

stay at camp to a material object sends the wrong message. The reward should be your child’s newfound confidence and independence.

- Pack a personal item from home, such as a stuffed animal.
- When a “rescue call” comes from the child, offer calm reassurance and put the time frame into perspective. Avoid the temptation to take the child home early.
- Talk candidly with the camp director to obtain his/her perspective on your child’s adjustment.
- Don’t feel guilty about encouraging your child to stay at camp. For many children, camp is a first step toward independence and plays an important role in their growth and development.
- Trust your instincts. While most cases of homesickness will pass in a day or two, some are severe. If your child is not eating or sleeping because of anxiety or depression, it is time to go home. However, don’t make your child feel like a failure if his or her stay at camp is cut short. Focus on the positive and encourage your child to try camp again next year.

Source: American Camp Association