

SEND HOMESICKNESS PACKING THIS SUMMER

By Sharon Duke Estroff

It's a situation as sticky as a freshly roasted marshmallow. Your child - who's been looking forward to attending overnight camp since you signed her up this fall - suddenly develops a case of cold feet. She's no longer buzzing with excitement over her upcoming month of summer fun. She's teary-eyed and anxious over spending thirty days (720 hours!) away from mom and dad. (And truth be told, you're a tad teary-eyed and anxious about those 720 hours, yourself).

So what's a parent to do with a bout of pre-camp jitters and a rapidly-approaching departure date?

Take solace in the fact that you're in good company (studies show 95% of campers - even seasoned ones - suffer some degree of anxiety over leaving home); Remind yourself that overnight camp offers your child a trunkful of benefits (from round the clock entertainment, to critical independence and social skills, to - in cases of Jewish overnight camps - a proven insurance policy toward future Jewish commitment); And take measures to ensure your child is geared for sleep-away camp on the inside, as well as the outside.

Here are some tips toward warming even the coldest of little feet and keeping homesickness at bay all summer long:

What to say:

- Play down your own separation anxiety. Rather than rambling on about how much you're going to miss your little bubbeleh, you serve your child (and yourself) much better to focus on all the fun and excitement awaiting at camp.
- Let's not make a deal. Most camp directors shudder at the thought of guilt-ridden parents promising to pick up their children mid-session if they want to come home. Such bargaining impedes the normal adjustment process and undermines the camp's protocol for dealing with homesickness. Instead, investigate the resources available at camp for homesick kids, and make your child aware that a tangible support system is intact should she need it.
- Catch the gist of her jitters. Children become apprehensive about leaving home for a all kinds of reasons. They may worry, for example, about not being able to kiss parents goodnight or what will happen should they get sick. By zeroing in (as much as possible) on the root of your child's trepidation, you can better address her concerns.
- Engage in some multigenerational commiseration. In sharing your own tales of overcoming homesickness as a kid (even if it takes a wee bit of embellishment), you'll help your child understand the universality of this experience while providing her hope toward overcoming it.

- Communicate confidence. By pointing out the strengths in your child's character that have helped her overcome adversity and challenge in the past (i.e. sense of humor, compassion or leadership qualities) you'll build her confidence in her ability to successfully hop the homesickness hurdle as well.
- Illuminate the silver lining. Put a positive spin on homesickness by explaining that it's actually a good sign - it means you love your family and they love you.

What to do:

- Bag the brand-new linens. By skipping the Bed, Bath and Beyond shopping spree and sending your child to camp with the sheets, blankets and pillowcases she uses in her own room, you'll ensure she's wrapped in the comforts of home throughout her stay away.
- Make sure she has a familiar face at camp. Having at least one friend in the cabin on opening day can make all the difference to a jittery camper; so call the camp, ask for the names and numbers of a few of your child's future bunkmates, and arrange a pre-camp playdate or two. (If this is a logistical impossibility a friendly phone call makes a great plan B).
- Send a security object. A favorite stuffed animal promises to be worth its weight in canteen money late at night when the "lonelies" hit. (Hint: In cases of "ultracoolism" disguise the stuffed toy in a linen-matching pillow case.)
- Give her an earful. Prevent homesickness from harboring by equipping your child with an iPod (if allowed) uploaded with the familiar sounds of home (i.e. parents sharing encouraging words or reading a favorite bedtime story, silly messages from siblings, even barks from a much-loved pup).
- Soothe her with surprises. Keep your child's spirits up during the first days of camp by secretly slipping reassuring notes into toothbrush holders, soap dishes and pants pockets.
- Pile on the postage. When it comes to mail call, quantity generally weighs heavier than quality with campers. A steady flow of short notes on cheerful stationery will ensure the postman consistently delivers your child happy heap. (Hint: further maximize mail-flow by giving stamped envelopes, preaddressed to your child, to friends and relatives.)
- Get her journaling. Writing down feelings can be cathartic to adults and kids alike. By providing your child a journal for recording camp experiences, you'll help ensure both positive and lasting memories.
- Frame yourself. A few family photos in heavy-duty frames will keep your camper feeling close to home even when she's far away.
- Keep an eye on the big picture. Although it can be heart-wrenching to watch your child suffer through homesickness, rest assured that in resisting the urge to rescue her and affording her the opportunity to overcome this challenge, you'll ultimately raise a stronger, more resilient, all-around happier camper.

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