

# How to Handle Homesick Campers

(From Camp Counselor Life, October 2013)

No matter what camp you work at, you're bound to have homesick campers. Some cry. Some scream. Some pout in a corner and refuse to participate. Some will even claim to be sick, hurt, or even dying and they "WANNA GO HOME RIGHT NOW!" Whether you've been working at camp for 1 year or 10 years, handling homesick campers is still difficult.

My first session of the summer I had the most homesick camper that I've ever had (not counting the one whose mom took her home before even reaching the registration table because she wouldn't stop screaming). This girl did NOT want to be at camp. She had me worn out by the end of day one. Days were terrible! She didn't want to swim, hike, play, eat, the girl would't even shower! All she wanted to do was cry and beg me to let her go home. And nighttime? NIGHTMARISH!!! She would wail and sob and kick and scream and demand that we let her go home so she could sleep in her own bed. When people tell you that working at camp will test you, this is precisely what they are talking about. Let me tell you, this kid tried everything to get home. She acted like she was about to pass out, cried so hard that her whole face turned red, and even tried to make herself throw up. Since she demanded that she was desperately ill, we made multiple treks to the nurse where she got a clean bill of health each time. So we sat out, just her and I, and watched all the other kids play and have a good time. I would ask her every so often if she felt well enough to start playing and she would just whine and say she felt worse. I tried everything. I gave her special jobs to do during cookouts, offered to let her lead the group in our hike to the dining hall, or even let her help pick the next game or activity. Nothing worked. Until the last day. She had finally gotten tired of acting sick and realized that even acting like the spawn of Satan wasn't going to get her home. I think she realized that she had one final day of camp left so she might as well make the most of it. And she did! She finally put on that bathing suit and played in the pool! She laughed and played and actually smiled for the first time that whole week. Seeing her finally having fun was almost worth the turmoil that she put everyone through that first week. Almost.

The point of my story is that there is light at the end of the tunnel for every homesick camper. There are many ways to help kids overcome their homesickness, especially at nighttime when it can be at it's very worst. The key thing to remember is that almost all kids are going to want to go home at some point and you have to be sensitive with them even though you may be at your wit's end. It can be difficult for me because I was never homesick as a camper. I couldn't wait to get away for a week and I cried when my parents picked me up on the last day! And although it was hard for me, I've learned a lot of great ways to help kids that I hope work for you too!

## FACTS ABOUT HOMESICKNESS

- 1. It is completely normal** – Camps is scary for a lot of kids. Most kids rarely go outside to play, so the thought of living in the woods for a week can be pretty daunting. Almost all kids will feel homesick at some point and you must remember to be sensitive and patient with them

because they need your help. Think about it, you are like their parent for the week and you need to be there for them like a parent would.

**2. Campers will do ANYTHING to convince you that they are truly ill.** Tummyaches, headaches, dizziness, nausea, etc. Homesick campers will try anything to convince you that they are sick and need to go home. While you can't ignore when a child tells you that they are ill, you can have them sip water or tell them that if they still feel ill in 30 minutes THEN you can go to the nurse. Most kids will get caught up in having so much fun that they forget about their "symptoms".

**3. Nighttime is a Nightmare.** Think about it. It's dark and scary outside and the only light they have is a flashlight. (depending on how rustic your camp is). They can hear a ton of new (and sometimes scary) noises. They're in a new (much less comfy) bed. It's hot. And the biggest factor: It's quiet. All they they've been too busy to be homesick, but now there's nothing to distract them from thinking about home. Cue tears.

## **HOW TO HELP – DAY**

**1. The most important thing to do is keep them busy!!!** Too much down time is a dangerous thing at camp! They need constant stimulation to distract them from thinking about home. Even when your just hiking to the dining hall, sing with them! A funny song can do wonders to combat thinking about how much they miss home. MY BEST ADVICE TO YOU IS Just because the campers are having their required "me time" does not mean it's your "me time" See, here's the glorious thing about our job: YOU DON'T GET BREAKS! Always keep your eyes out for kids who are sad at me time or sitting alone in their cabin. Gather them all up for a round of green glass door or quick game of tag! I'm telling you, the busier you keep your unit, the less homesick campers you're going to have.

**2. Give the one on one time** – Sometimes all a homesick camper needs is some one on one time to make them feel important and for you to redirect their thoughts to a happier place. When a camper is crying it is sooo important to pull them aside to talk to them. If you keep them with the group and try to solve the issue within earshot of 30 other kids, it will snowball and soon you'll have every kid in your unit crying and begging to go home. So, pull them aside and ask them what's wrong. When they tell you "I miss my mom, I wanna go home" LEAVE IT AT THAT. It is soo important that you immediately redirect their thoughts away from home. Get them talking about their favorite thing so far at camp or the silliest story they have about their puppy, Fido. Getting the talking about something that makes them happy is key. What TO say: "Hey I know your sad, but think about how awesome the scavenger hunt is going to be tonight!!! Have you ever done a scavenger hunt before? Tell me all about it!" What NOT TO say: "Awww I'm sorry you miss your mom, what is she like? Why do you miss her?" NO NO NO NO NO. This will only make the child more homesick because you are encouraging them to keep thinking about why they miss home so much. Don't, I repeat, Don't do that. Redirecting their thoughts is key.

**3. Give them a special job** – Kids love feeling important. When you see that that they're sad, tell them that if they promise to stay positive for the rest of the day, you'll let them be a

lineleader, pick the next game, or be the first in line to make s'mores. That way they have to make a conscious effort to be positive in order to EARN the reward.

## **HOW TO HELP – NIGHTTIME**

1. **Fluffy Friends!!!.** Ask them if they brought a special stuffed animal to camp. If so, tell them to give them a big squeeze every time that they start to feel sad. If they don't have one, give them one! If your camp doesn't have a supply of stuffed animals, bring your own! I have a whole duffle bag of various fluffy friends to hand out during emergencies! Just make sure that none of them have sentimental value to you because you may not get them back. When you hand them out, tell them to give the animal a big squeeze whenever they start to feel sad and to think of you and how much you believe in them and how proud you are of them for getting through the night! Works like a charm!

2. **Counting sheep is old news.** Ask them about their favorite T.V. show! (Again, redirecting their thoughts is key) Have them tell you all about their favorite episode and why it makes them happy. Then tell them that as soon as they lay down, to imagine that they are their favorite character in that T.V. show and to go through the entire episode as that character, making whatever new choices that they want. And make them pinky promise to tell you all about the episode in the morning! This one is my personal favorite!

3. **Have a Night Noises talk on the first night.** Each week at camp, I sat all the kids down on the first night and have a "night noises" talk. I think this is important because it prevents kids getting scared of noises that they are unfamiliar with. Remember, some kids have never spent much time outdoors, especially at night! Ask them what noises they think they might here and ask them to make try and recreate that noise so they know what to expect. When they can't think of anymore, tell them about the noises that aren't as obvious. \*The slamming of the latrine doors, turtles rustling in the leaves (turtles actually sound terrifying if you don't know what they are, even I'll admit it!), owls, etc) Having this talk will help kids feel much more at ease, I promise!

Well that's all I have for now, I hope this gives you some new ideas on how to handle homesick campers! Feel free to leave comments on what has worked for you, I'm always looking for suggestions and new tips and tricks!

Stay wonderful! :)

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