

Homesickness at Camp Matoaka

Most campers feel some hesitation before going on their first adventure away from home without parents. Many parents are also nervous about the separation from their child, especially if your camper is expressing anxiety about going away to camp.

When faced with a situation that calls for new behavior, it is characteristic of humans to want to return to ways of doing things that are most deeply ingrained in them. Commonly called the “nesting instinct,” every person craves comfort and security in their surroundings. Children who are homesick suffer guilt and anxiety. They are anxious because they feel that without a parent present, they cannot survive. Homesickness is also a crisis in confidence. Homesick feelings may be reflected in indirect ways. “The food stinks here. There are tons of bugs everywhere. Absolutely nobody in my bunk likes me, and I have no friends.” Intuitive parents learn to decipher this code and read it for its face value. Children are unaware that their homesickness is a distortion of need. They think they still need a mother to do for them what they don’t think they can do for themselves.

The biggest source of concern for parents is how your child will handle the separation from you and if they will experience negative emotions, often referred to as “homesickness,” while at camp. While most campers do not feel extreme symptoms of homesickness at camp, many go through emotional challenges during their first (and subsequent) summers at camp. **These feelings are normal** and are something that we have helped many campers work through. Campers, and their parents, feel a great sense of accomplishment when they successfully overcome the challenge of homesickness.

We hope the following information will begin to help you and your daughter prepare for a successful summer away from home.



BEFORE CAMP

Pre-homesick planning should begin long before the final goodbye at the bus, plane or at camp. We suggest involving your child as much as possible in pre-camp planning. Make her feel a part of the process from the start. For example, explain that she will be expected to write home three times each week for “Letter Days.” Then let her choose her own personalized stationery. Discuss the need for labels, for lost and found and laundry items. Have her practice using her laundry bag in her room for a couple weeks, and keeping a flashlight to read at bedtime. Many child psychologists feel that preparation for a first summer at camp may be more important than the child’s personality or age in determining whether or not she’ll be homesick.

Please start talking with your daughter about camp NOW! Review the camp website, videos, newsletters, clothing catalog and other logistics about the time at camp, such as schedule, trip days, etc. Ask the camp for some names and contact information of other campers in her age group. Introduce your daughter in person or on FaceTime/Zoom and let them get to know one another. The more familiar faces, the better and more comfortable she will be from the very beginning. Also, schedule a call with the Directors so your camper can ask questions that may help her feel more at ease, such as “What time is wake-up? And how do I know where Arts and Crafts is located?”

In April, your daughter will be asked to complete an Activity Preference Form. Let her help choose her schedule! This gives both of you a greater feeling of familiarity about what she will be doing at camp. After all, this is what homesickness is... a longing or wish for the familiar or known, usually while we are in an unfamiliar and strange place. Your daughter has not yet had the chance to make our camp a “home-away-from-home”. She has not yet experienced “Matoaka Magic.”

It’s painful to admit there are times when our children aren’t happy and there is not much we can do to make it better. One psychologist stated, “...Parents take far too much credit for their kids’ success and far too much blame for their kids’ difficulties. The best advice is to be available



and supportive, and tell them often that you love them, even if they pretend not to hear.”

All of this is training for her future in the adult world. *Every child has to practice being independent and every parent must practice letting his or her child be independent.* Finding ways that a camper can be resilient, and problem solve on her own, can build self-confidence and ultimately give a camper a successful summer experience away from home.

Everything children do is part of learning to become productive, accountable, kind, and responsive. How we react as parents to our kids’ stress and conflicts also affects the way they may manage challenges.

Homesickness is as much about parents as it is about the child. It is best not to let your child see your fears about camping. It is not helpful to say “I’ll be lonely without you” or “I’ll worry about you” or “The house will be empty without you”. These words, while sincere, are not what your camper needs to hear. Your daughter needs a parental show of strength. When parents are confident in their child’s ability to do well on her own and they expect her to have a good time, they give her the necessary self-assurance to meet new challenges.

DURING CAMP

- Arrival: Your daughter will arrive to camp and immediately be surrounded by her bunk mates, counselors, and Directors.
- Routine: Camp is very scheduled – the bugle rings at the same time in the mornings, the meal times are always consistent, there are always breaks in the activity schedule for snacks or to change, and there is always something to do and someone to be with!
- Bunk Jobs: Each camper has a job to do in her cabin each morning, in addition, she is required to make her bed. If she is not required to do any of these chores at home, please prepare her.



- Bunk Members: Your camper will live in a bunk that includes her bunkmates as well as 4-5 counselors who sleep in the same space. There is always an adult in the cabin.
- Health and Wellness: We have an entire Health Center on camp in case she doesn't feel well.
- Directors: Leslie and Jason, and all of the Head Counselors are available all day, every day. Our office doors are always open and we walk around camp to check in on campers and staff!
- Communication: Parents can write one-way daily emails printed for our campers, and campers can write home anytime, but at least three days a week. Please review the phone call policy with your camper.

Unless children are prepared for new experiences and for this new camp situation, the change of living in a bunk with new people, eating with three hundred or more people in a dining room and hearing the loons on the lake can be a shock.

When your daughter is homesick she dreams of perhaps having breakfast with the family, playing with siblings (yes, even if all they do is fight the other ten months of the year), watching TV or just playing with friends. Everyone is there and things are like they are supposed to be. Your daughter may complain of feeling ill. She may feel frightened, lonely and abandoned. Her pain feels real. Her suffering increases at night and during quiet times of the day. Rest hour and early mornings can be tough times.

Recently we've discovered that most of our homesick campers have never moved or have not changed schools since the age of five. If this description fits your daughter, a discussion about change, growing up and dusting off her 'friendship-making' skills is necessary. Skills for keeping friends are different from skills required to make friends. Please discuss this with your daughter. Friendship-making skills require your daughter to "offer" herself in friendship. To go out of her way to make a connection with another person is essential. Discuss the subject of breaking the ice with new people. Can she approach a new friend and initiate a conversation without being pushy or offensive? Practice role playing and decide on a method that feels



comfortable to her. It is so important for her to reach out even if she hasn't had to make friends in a long time. A child tends to sit back and wait for someone to make the first move. If others don't, it compounds the feeling of isolation and hopelessness as she watches others enjoying themselves. As one camper said to us "every body is so happy, and I am not."

PARENTS' TO DO LIST

- Be positive about the camp experience and emphasize the good things. If you have personal anxieties about it, don't burden your daughter with them. Do not make the mistake of telling your daughter repeatedly how much you will miss her. This will only cause her to worry about this. If she is aware of anyone who has not had a favorable camp experience, express regret for this rather than as a possibility for your child. You may say it was a shame that Skylar didn't enjoy camp and that she missed wonderful activities after she left.
- Do not write long sad and nostalgic letters. Newsy letters of who's doing what, who you have seen lately, and where you have gone with other adults tend to be great stabilizers for your daughter. She will not feel she is missing anything at home. Overly cheerful letters may not help either, one eleven-year-old told her mom, "Tell dad not to write such happy letters, it makes me feel like I should be there."
- Keep the lines of communication open. Listen to your daughter's thoughts, her worries and fears, and be reassuring. Once you have registered her for camp, keep bringing the subject of camp up. She may need help talking about it. Homesickness may reoccur in your daughter's first and second year at camp, but once a child has mastered her homesickness, she has gained something amazing - a proud feeling of self worth.
- Assess if your child is really ready for camp. We do not recommend pursuing the matter if a child really opposes camp. It can be discussed at a later time when the child is ready.



HOMESICK AT CAMP

If your daughter is displaying signs of homesickness at camp, here are the steps we will take (and please remember, every camper, and every situation can be different):

- You will be notified by camp if the length of the homesickness has started to impact your daughter's time at camp
- You may be the one to contact camp after receiving a sad letter home
- We will suggest the following to your camper:
 - a) Would you like to sit with a special friend in the dining hall?
 - b) What is your favorite activity to do at camp? (Let's do more of this)
 - c) What do you not like in your schedule? (Let's do less of this)
 - d) How have you offered yourself in friendship to others? Have you asked someone to walk to lunch with you ...asked them to hit a tennis ball with you? Asked a bunkmate to show you where to go to get a snack?
 - e) What counselor(s) do you enjoy being around? (Let's see more of them)
 - f) What campers do you want to spend more time with?
 - g) Have you been receiving mail or email print-outs?
 - h) Is there anything you are worried about? Is there anything you feel you are missing? (maybe your favorite stuffed animal)
 - i) Did you have a good year at school?
 - j) This is what growing up is all about. It's not only about good things like staying up late, its about a lot of change and sometimes change is difficult.
 - k) Depending on the camper's age we might suggest increased communication with her parents –sometimes this will help her get over the “hump”. In this case we always call the parents first without the child present to get their permission and formulate a ‘homesick’ plan.

If you are informed that your daughter is homesick at camp, please use the following as a guide:



DO:

- Set limits – short-term solutions such as taking her home, do not last.
- Show support for the person who is trying to grow up inside her.
- Be candid about questions we ask about her home life.
- Be in contact with a Director about recent letters you've received.
- Be sympathetic but strong when faced with a crying child begging to go home.
- Reinforce her original commitment to want to come to camp.
- Reinforce her strengths and ingenuity.
- Remind her of consideration for others.
- Tell her I love you.
- Tell her what faith you have in her ability to deal with her difficulties.
- Speak to her about surviving adversity.
- Ask her some 'hard questions.' "Have you offered yourself in friendship to others?"..."Have you been sensitive to others?"
- Tell her she's the best.
- Support the people at camp supporting your daughter. Trust the process.

DON'TS:

- Panic
- Tell her "just try it for four more days and we will see how you feel then."
- Fluctuate even slightly over your first resolve...to have her complete camp.
- Don't send packages. (Give her encouragement not things, unless directed to by a Director)
- Don't try to rescue her – it keeps her from learning to tolerate frustration and separation.
- Don't cast an older sibling in a 'care taker' role – this causes feelings of resentment.



HOMESICK EXAMPLES

Homesickness often ends when the camper gets involved with the program. If it is more severe, we will always call you. The severity of the homesickness usually depends on the age of the child; the older the child the worse the problem. Older girls often feel worse because they are embarrassed or feel they have fallen short of your expectations. Homesickness is for little kids, not for mature teenagers like themselves. This dependency can breed anger and hostility. These feelings may come out in heartbreaking letters like this one:

“Dear Mom and Dad,

I hate it here. Please let me come home. I will make my bed everyday and not use my phone for one year. I cannot last another day. Every night I cry. I cannot fall asleep without having you lay with me in my bed. I threw up today and went to the Health Center. The nurses don't know anything, said I was fine. I do not have any friends and I'm so homesick I'm about to die. Please come and get me, NOW! I hate camp.

Love Jordan.

These are my teardrops.”

How is a parent suppose to respond to this? The way Jordan's mother did; by giving her daughter confidence in her abilities to cope, acknowledging her complaints and doing it with dignity and tact.

“Dear Jordan,

We read your letter and were impressed by how clearly you stated your feelings. We know that it is not easy for you. You miss us very much and wish you were home. We love you too, and have faith in your ability to make a good summer for yourself. We know you will benefit greatly from the all of the activities you will learn and the friendships you will make. You are so capable and we have spoken to the Director and know there are many kids and adults that care for you. We are looking forward to talking to you soon. Is there anything you want us to bring when we see you on Visiting Day?

Love Mommy and Daddy.”



Of course there are always judgement calls based on your child's individual maturity and personality. The ability to call home and speak to you is always something we might offer to a few homesick campers. We do not allow phone calls until after the first week of your daughters stay with us. There are always exceptions.

Some campers like Anne require different treatment. Anne is a mature eight-year-old only child who knows her own mind. She came to us crying about being homesick, but ended up talking about which activities she wanted on her schedule. She had no complaints about camp. The second time Anne came to us she was agitated and said matter of factly, "I need to speak to my mother." After her phone call home, Anne was never homesick again. Some children just need to touch base with their parents.

Janie is another child who required a slightly different approach. She was very homesick her first year at camp. Her second year started out fine and then four days into the season she was homesick again. She admitted it wasn't as bad as the first year, but she was disappointed in herself because she was also the only camper in her bunk not to get mail from her parents during the first four days of camp. After speaking with her mom, she quickly recovered with a few hugs and encouragement.

Jessica returned for her fourth summer with us and had never been homesick before. She'd moved twice, once when she was five years old, and again when she was eleven. She didn't fit into the homesick mold of having rusty friendship-making skills. She had friends and knew a lot of people. Her first cousin was a popular counselor who had been coming to camp since she was eight years old. But other circumstances can contribute to homesickness. The previous school year had been a bad one for Jessica. Then her best friend decided to change schools so she was projecting ahead to the fall when she would be without her. Her best friend at camp the previous summer did not return to camp this summer, so Jessica was starting all over again in the friend department. She was dealing with a new development that she didn't think she could handle...a definite crisis of confidence!



IN CLOSING

While this feeling of homesickness is powerful and strong, for most campers it soon passes as they get more involved with the camp program, gain new friends, and feel closer to their bunkmates and counselors. Very few campers get so homesick they must leave camp early. There is great self-satisfaction when a girl conquers homesickness and realizes what she has achieved in the process. Many parents tell us their recovered homesick child went on to have the best school year ever. Loyalties, camaraderie and strong attachments evolve when a commitment is made and completed. These benefits can last a lifetime molding your daughter into the strong and healthy woman she will become.

Camp Matoaka is always ready to assist campers toward overcoming bouts of homesickness...campers are encouraged to seek our personal help. We are also there for our camp parents too. This all begins before camp even starts! Please give us a call and let us know how you are feeling. We are here for our camp parents as much as we are here for our campers. We pride ourselves on our ability to work closely with our families and for our campers to deal with homesickness with dignity and confidence.

