

## **Additional Tips for First Time Campers (and Parents)**

Being away from home for the first time, or even just the first time at YMCA Camp Duncan, is an exciting and new experience! There is much independence to be gained and exciting activities to be a part of! Thank goodness there are caring staff and new friends waiting to be made when you arrive at camp. What follows here are additional ideas for making a smooth transition to your time away from home.

### **Create Coping Strategies Together**

The next step is to help your child learn just how much they can and cannot control in their situation at camp, and effective coping strategies for when the going gets tough. A profile of coping methods that children say are effective in dealing with missing home is reported in the May 2000 issue of the American Psychological Association's (APA) journal *Developmental Psychology*. "Talking with children about a wide range of ways to cope with homesickness before camp starts is a first step," says psychologists Christopher Thurber, Ph.D., and John R. Weisz, Ph.D., authors of the study, at the University of California in Los Angeles. Explain to your child that twinges of missing home are common and nothing to worry about. Reassure them of your confidence in their ability to overcome the normal problems of separating. Together, draw up a set of procedures for being at camp in advance. ("If you're missing home, what do you think you could do about it?") Have the child work out a plan. It could include some of the following elements: talk to her/his counselor; talk to the Camp Director; write letters to parents, grandparents and friends to ensure a steady supply of return mail; bring some hobby materials or some favorite games to play with others during free times in the day (down time is often when missing home crops up); offer to help plan an activity; or volunteer to help with clean-up. These activities help make a camper feel needed, important, and involved in the community. They are all ideas that counselors and the camp director will suggest too, and help to facilitate. But it helps a camper to think about them in advance with his/her parents.

Through the data he collected and in personal interviews with children, Dr. Thurber discovered that they were quite resourceful in learning to handle their emotions. Children told him that one of the most successful coping methods they used was to do something fun and physical. Another common method was to think about time in manageable segments. "Well," said one child, "there are 52 weeks in a year and I'm only here for two of those 52 weeks. I've already been here for three days. That means that there are only 11 days to go. When I get up tomorrow morning there are only ten days to go." Dr. Thurber also found that kids are often able to link home and camp more readily if they bring a "transitional" object with them. This can be a photograph, a favorite teddy bear, a good luck charm, or even a blanket. Such transitional objects keep the connection with home fresh. Writing letters home also made their time away easier.

### **Practice Separation**

Dr. Thurber recommends practice separation before camp. "Before children go to overnight camps, they should practice with shorter separations to learn which coping methods work for them... Their parents can help them understand which aspects of the separation they can control (like letter writing, participation in activities) and which aspects they cannot control (like duration of the separation, routines of the new environment)." Children can start gradually with an overnight away and work up to weekends (perhaps at a grandparent's house, or with a good friend). When they return, Thurber suggests

parents talk with their child about how they felt. It is within the capacity of any school-age child to accept the fact that school, sports, camp, family life, or even life in general won't always be perfect. So affirm both their positive and negative feelings and the reasons for them. "Homesickness is associated with a lot of negative emotions, but they aren't so extreme that the children can't overcome them. In fact it promotes coping skills," says Thurber. Try not to have any significant telephone contact with your child while you are separated for this brief time. Our experience at camp is that telephone conversations with parents tend to bring on feelings of missing home, so campers are not permitted to initiate telephone calls home. Don't forget to reach a verbal agreement ahead of time with your child to honor our no phone calls policy. If your child comes home and says they were homesick, talk about how they handled it – what worked in coping with those emotions and what didn't. As your child develops tools to succeed, you can also encourage them with a chart that monitors successful overnights, so they can see themselves climbing the ladder of readiness. The least homesick children are those who change what they can about the separation and adjust to what they can't, and that takes practice. The kids in Dr. Thurber's study who dealt best with homesickness took action to alter what could be altered but accepted what they could not change. They adjusted to what couldn't be changed by keeping busy. The kids who had the hardest time handling homesickness gave up all control believing they couldn't change anything about their situation or their feelings. Dr. Thurber says that coping strategies are best summed up by this ten year old: "You can try to make the best of this week and have the best time you can or you can just sit there and have a worse time and have it go by slowly. You can try or just give up."

## **Missing Home While At Camp**

### **What to Expect**

When children are first away from home, they may experience several days of mild to severe emotions of missing home until they become adjusted to camp. Letters written during the first few days of camp may reflect this. Children generally gain independence and self-reliance from seeing their camp experience through to the finish. We will help your child feel connected to and supported by camp. If you anticipate or sense homesickness in your child, please speak privately with your child's cabin counselors and camp director during or prior to check-in.

### **How Parents Can Help**

At camp, many children will test their effect on their parents, and their own capacity to separate. At these times it can be difficult for parents to insist their child follow through with camp. However, for school age children, helping them deal with frustration, disappointment, conflict and sadness while remaining in their situation is appropriate. Giving your child confidence in his/her ability to cope with the difficulties of daily life and experience in handling an appropriate degree of discomfort and problems is good parenting, because it helps them be independent, separate and strong. Missing home is not a 24-hour a day affliction. It comes in temporary waves at odd moments of the day. Most homesick children have fun most of the time. Their fellow campers and counselors see their whole range of feelings and behavior – the parents hear only the miserable moments in the most recent letter. It's important to remember that these moments do not make a summer. Acknowledging the very real feelings that are being felt at the moment and sharing your perspective can help – you might remind your child that she/he only feels miserable some of the time, and refer to the coping strategies you all practiced before coming to camp. In speaking to a child who is missing home, the best thing a parent

can say is "Honey, I know you're missing home. It's normal to have those feelings. I want you to make the adjustment, and I feel confident that you can and that you will. I want to help you in any way I can to settle in. I don't expect you to be happy all the time, or to stop missing us. But I do expect you to stay there, and deal with the feelings you have. We'll write to you often, and you will see through the commitment you made." Let your child know that camp is a commitment, and that he/she is a person who respects and honors commitments, and gets satisfaction from following through (even though it might not always be easy all the time). Once the option of going home is closed, the work of adjusting to being at camp can begin. Most cases of homesickness fade away by the third or fourth day, if treated with a little attention and recognition. We try to help the camper to make a place for him/herself within the camp community. Tough cases require a triple dose of effort, involving cooperation between parents, the camper, and staff.

### **Common Pitfalls**

The worst thing a parent can say is "Darling, I know you're going to love it eventually. Just try it a few more days (or a week, or two weeks, or whatever) and if you still miss home, I'll come and get you." This approach doesn't work because it puts the camper in the position of being right (I knew I wouldn't like it, come and get me) or of being wrong (I was wrong about not liking it, I want to stay). Nobody likes being wrong or backing down. With the "try it for one more day" approach, we find campers typically stay exactly one day longer and then demand their parents make good on their promise. When they do, the loss is many-fold: the camper has uncertainties about their capacity to handle independence, and has lost out on a great learning experience from which they had begun to gain many new skills and friends. Next, they have a boring week at home with no friends and no planned activities. It may be a long time before they'll feel ready to break away. There is a loss at camp, too. The amount of psychic energy that staff and campers put into helping a camper who misses home creates close ties. That invested energy pays off in great emotional involvement when those emotions are overcome. We hate to see campers leave camp early, and we miss them when they go. Parents also lose, not only financially, but also in the disappointment of seeing their child miss out on an experience that they could have learned to handle, and in the last-minute change in plans that means parents have to provide alternative activities. Finally, other campers may become homesick, or have their homesick feelings magnified by their friend's departure. Another common mistake is to "bribe" a child into staying at camp. Linking a successful stay at camp to a material object or other experience sends a message that camp is worth it just for a material object. The reward for fulfilling their commitment to stay at camp should be their new found confidence and independence.

### **Tips for parents coping with campers missing home while at camp:**

If your child wants to talk with you on the phone, we'll talk with you in advance about it. When speaking with your child, offer calm reassurance and put the time frame into perspective. Avoid the temptation to take them home early. Let him/her know it will be an adjustment for the whole family but it is worthwhile experience and part of growing up. Speak with your child for a moderate amount of time. Reinforce the positive aspects of camp.

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. If your child sends letters saying "I hate camp. I cried last night. I can't sleep at night," DON'T PANIC. Send reassuring,

supportive letters and talk candidly with the camp director to obtain his/her perspective on your child's adjustment. Trust your instincts. Most incidents of missing home will pass in a day or two. Research shows only seven percent of cases are truly severe. If your child is not eating or sleeping because of anxiety or depression, we will recommend they return home. If their stay at camp is cut short, focus on the positive and encourage your child to try camp again next year.

When it is time for the call to end, ask your child to pass the phone to the camp director, who will be there for the duration of the call. This will give you a chance to talk with a staff person, and make for an easier transition than hanging up on your child. If all efforts fail, your child may go home. We will never make them feel guilty about it, and we hope that you will support us in that. Say, "I'm proud you stayed as long as you did". If your child says "Never again," while you're hugging him/her quietly say "Never is a long time. Perhaps, one day you will tell me that you are ready to go to camp."

Article: "You Can Try or You Can Just Give Up: the Impact of Perceived Control and Coping Style on Childhood Homesickness" by Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D., and John R. Weisz, Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, in *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 3. (Full text available from the American Psychological Association Public Affairs Office. Contact: Pam Willenz, APA Public Affairs Office. Phone: (202) 3365707. E-mail: [public.affairs@apa.org](mailto:public.affairs@apa.org). Article: "Handling Homesickness at Camp" by Susan Herman

**One more (important) note...**

Obviously camp focuses on the camper, and this material has focused on making a smooth transition for your child being away from home. The flip side of this situation, and one that should not be ignored, is dealing with your own emotions of separation. Parents spend the time their child is at camp in many different ways! Just like we advise campers to take advantage of all the activities and opportunities camp affords, we likewise hope that you will enjoy the time while your child is at camp. For some that means enjoying the quiet and luxury of doing nothing, for others it is important to stay busy with hobbies, work, or friends. We recommend taking yourself out for a treat, buying a magazine, and congratulating yourself for giving your child the opportunity to spend a session at YMCA Camp Duncan!