

CLOVERLEAF RANCH

home sickness

One of the wonderful benefits of summer camp is the opportunity for a child to develop independence in a supportive community. Developing independence while at camp may mean overcoming a degree of homesickness for some children.

Lead author Christopher Thurber, Ph.D., the staff psychologist at Exeter, research consultant to the American Camp Association (ACA), and author of a camp handbook for parents, says that “for over 100 years camps and schools have tried to keep [homesick children] busy and hoped it will go away.” However, “research shows that it’s healthier, and more effective to think about prevention.” His report aims to get this message to parents and those who are taking care of kids before they go to camp.

The recent research completed by Christopher Thurber compared the effectiveness of key preparation tools to standard camp preparation. On average, the results showed that a combination of coaching parents and educating children about effective coping lowered the intensity of first-year campers' homesickness by roughly 50 percent. Our goal at Cloverleaf is to do just this, help coach and educate you and your child so that you may both experience the finest week of camp possible.

In a similar study, Edward Walton, M.D., a U-M Health System assistant professor of emergency medicine and pediatrics who serves on the board of the American Camp Association (ACA) and was lead author of a 2005 AAP guideline on summer camp health that was produced in conjunction with the ACA says, “What parents say – and what pediatricians say — beforehand matters, and is very important for the intensity of homesickness.” One of the most important things for parents and staff to recognize, and to say to kids before any separation, is that it is normal, not strange, to feel homesick. In fact, research has shown that 90 percent of children attending summer camp feel some level of homesickness. The research goes on to show that another 20 percent of children may face serious levels of distress that, if untreated, will worsen over time and may interfere with their ability to benefit from the camp experience altogether.

Here at Cloverleaf our staff is experienced with helping campers move past homesickness. The procedure involves getting the camper active and involved, helping the camper meet new friends, and letting them know that it is normal to have these feelings. We encourage homesick campers to write down their feelings in a letter home. If you receive a letter from camp that is less than positive you should not worry too much; homesickness is usually over by the time you receive the letter.

Homesickness is not always exclusively for children. Parents can also have an adjustment to their child going to camp; instead of being 'homesick', they are "campsick." If you feel that you might fit into this category, establish a relationship with camp prior to opening day to improve your comfort level. Our camp director and owner, Shawna DeGrange, is more than happy to discuss feelings of nervousness and apprehension with you. You should call camp with any concerns before or during the camp period, or about your child's progress at camp while they are here.

Ultimately our approach is to:

- Be supportive, encouraging, empathetic but firm.
- Keep him/her busy!
- Try to identify and solve any underlying problems (being teased, perhaps) or help him/her learn to live with the insoluble ones (it's raining, the water's cold, etc.).

The foundations of a successful camp experience are often laid months before the opening day. Here are some things you can do as a parent to help set your child up for success at camp:

- Involve children in the decision to spend time away from home, so that children have a sense of control.
- Familiarize your son or daughter with our camp. Visit camp if possible, look at our DVD, and visit our website.
- Before the separation, don't make comments that express anxiety or ambivalence about the child going away. Certain comments can leave a child worried that something bad might happen to them or their parents, and make them preoccupied with thoughts of home.
- Use a calendar to show the exact amount of time your child will be away, if it is known. Predictability and perspective on the length of separation is important whenever possible.
- Don't make a "pick up plan" or a deal with your child to bring he or she home if they don't like the experience of being away. This undermines the child's sense that their parents have confidence in their ability to be on their own, and sets an expectation that they won't like the new experience.
- Have your child attend camp with a friend if you suspect it might help the transition.
- Practice writing letters, and supply pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes and paper before the child leaves home.
- Send encouraging letters telling her how proud you are of his/her accomplishments. Keep the letters focused on camp and not on things that are happening at home.

- Give information to your child’s counselor beforehand about what works for him/her:
 - If your child takes medicine for attention, behavior or psychological conditions, make sure that they, and our camp nurse and staff, know their medication schedule and the importance of sticking to it.
 - If your child has special medical needs, such as diabetes or asthma, make sure that our nurse and staff know how to handle day-to-day care and emergencies. (Parents who manage their child's care intensely can have an extra hard time giving up that control, and children can sense that anxiety).
- Don’t linger at camp too long on opening day. Staying too long just delays the transition to new surroundings and can add to your child’s anxiety level.
- Tell children that homesickness is normal, but that they can use strategies like writing letters home, sharing their feelings with other people, and thinking about all the good things that camp is giving them.
- Generally most camps have a policy regarding phone calls. Help your child understand the policy prior to camp so they will not be expecting to hear from you.
 - The specific policy here at Cloverleaf entails the following. Our counselors and staff discuss homesickness openly while reminding the child of all the wonderful aspects of camp; missing home, family, pets and friends is normal.
 - We encourage the child to try a day of activities before calling home. However, we do not have a “no calling home policy;” if your child needs to hear your voice we understand.
 - Nevertheless, when a “rescue call” comes from your child, we suggest that you offer calm reassurance and put the time frame into perspective. Avoid the temptation to take your child home early.
- If you went to camp as a child, focus on the great things you remember. Be positive about how you handled being away from home.
- Above all, know whether your child is really ready for a separation.

Cloverleaf is a very special place and we want your child to be a part of it! Above all we want you and your child to experience the best week(s) of camp possible. Our objective is to give your child the attention that he or she deserves. We are confident that your child will leave with memories that will last a lifetime.