

Preventing Homesickness at Camp

by Chaplain Francis Schwartz

Homesickness is described psychologically as a "manifestation of separation anxiety" or the "unconscious defense mechanism called regression." The Camp Director and Scoutmaster describe it as the longing for home." Many a young camper would put it more clearly as "that terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach." Regardless of how homesickness is defined, it is, indeed experienced in varying degrees by Scouts who come to camp.

What causes homesickness? It is a product of a happy home life, and it occurs often in a child who misses the warmth and security that comes from a good relationship with family and friends.

Homesickness is also a problem for a child whose parents are anxious about his welfare. A parent who will miss the child while he is at camp or worries that the camping experience will be unhappy often transmits this fear to the Scout. In short, while at camp, the boy often feels the anxiety of his parents and fulfills their expectations that he will miss home and not enjoy camp by becoming homesick.

Homesickness often produces regressive behavior in a child. In order to cope with the situation he will revert to behavior used at an earlier age to gain attention. Sometimes a boy will cry easily, wet the bed, or withdraw from others. When a boy who is normally sociable and active suddenly becomes quiet, alone and disinterested in what is happening around him, this can be a sign of homesickness.

The treatment of homesickness is not simple. It involves the active participation of the Scoutmaster, troop members, camp staff, and often firm, but understanding parents. When homesickness is detected, the youth must be listened to and his feelings understood. Often an understanding person, willing to listen and empathize is all that is needed. Any unusual behavior patterns that have developed, such as bedwetting, must be taken in stride and not be overly emphasized.

Next, the boy must be kept active and interested in some phase of camp life. An effort must be made to make the Scout part of the Troop and a part of all the camp's activities so that he can make friends.

If parents are contacted, they should do all in their power to avoid promising the Scout may come home, unless advised to do so by the Camp Director and Scoutmaster. Once a Scout leaves camp because of homesickness, he may not return.

Homesickness can be prevented. Parents are the best preventers. Parents must not promise their child that, if he doesn't like it he can come home. This promise sets the boy up for defeat. Parents must try to transmit positive messages about camp, emphasizing that his days at camp will be a worthwhile experience, and that they are happy he is going.

If a child wishes to take something special with him that reminds him of home, such as a pillow, blanket or toy, he should be encouraged to do so. This special object will be a reminder of and link to home.

Do not tell a Scout to telephone if he needs anything. Such advice could be contrary to the camp policy against indiscriminate use of phones.

When a Scout is ready to leave, avoid a dramatic departure scene. While the boy is at camp, letters can provide a bond with home during separation. The tone of the letter and its contents has a great effect on the production of homesickness. The letters should be conversational about events at home and ask questions about the Scout's experience at camp. They should never contain such lines as "We all miss you very much; we love you so." "Your dog hasn't eaten since you left." "We served your favorite meal last night, too bad you could not be with us to eat it." Items that may cause jealousy should also be avoided like "Yesterday, we bought your brother a new bike". Campers sometimes break into tears after reading such well-intentioned letters from home.

Homesickness is a common occurrence, and if faced with understanding and care is just another step in the process of growing up. Parents, members of the Troop, and the Camp Staff should all be aware of its causes, means of prevention, and above all, its cure. The cure is simply a great deal of understanding, and willingness to help another person deal with his feelings while getting involved in the Scouting Program.

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