What Camp Staff Can Do to Help Children: An Excerpt from Homesick and Happy

Michael G. Thompson, PhD
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Dear Colleagues,

When I sat down to write my new book, Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow, I wanted to answer three questions: 1) Why is it developmentally important for parents to send their children away from home?; 2) What do we know about homesickness, a psychological condition that both children and parents fear and that keeps many children from even trying sleep-away camp?; and 3) What are the most important growth-producing elements of the camp experience? In an earlier issue of Camping Magazine, I tackled the first question. For this training issue, I want to briefly address the second two.

There is an important scientific literature on homesickness, largely written by Dr. Christopher Thurber and his colleagues (2007). In his own work as a camp counselor, Chris found that the conventional wisdom about homesickness, namely that all children would recover from it in a few days, was quite wrong. His research has revealed that while homesickness is an almost universal experience, eighty-one percent of campers recover from it relatively quickly, supported by their friends, comforted by talks with their counselors, and distracted by camp activities. Nineteen percent of children experience “significant distress” at various times during a camp session, characterized by acute yearning and obsessional thoughts of home, parents, favorite foods, and pets. Six percent of children suffer from a severe homesickness that is with them every day of a camp session (and their counselors have to learn how to acknowledge it and bear it, even though it will make the counselors feel quite helpless).

These children are, in a sense, the heroes of my book because, in spite of their daily pain, most manage to stick it out for the session and more than half of them return to sleep-away camp the next year. It takes guts to return to a place where you have experienced so much pain. Why do they come back? Children see the developmental tasks before them, and they summon up their own courage. Looking back on my son Will’s first summer at camp, he was certainly among the nineteen percent “distress” group and probably in the six percent “chronically homesick” group. When I asked him at the age of twenty-one why he had gone back to camp, he replied, “Dad, if you can’t learn to sleep away from your own house, you are going to have to live with your parents for the rest of your life.”

In Homesick and Happy, I point to ten elements that make camp such a powerful growth experience for kids, but if I were forced to choose one element above all others, the most powerful one is relationships between counselors and children. Our society segregates children by age, sorting them for academic reasons — fourth grade, fifth grade, middle school, and high school — and for management reasons, but such separation is not natural. Some children
naturally want to “play up” with older kids; others want to “play down” with younger children so they can consolidate their own developmental gains and practice leadership skills.

With the loss of mixed-age neighborhood play in America, it is almost impossible for children to find the opportunity to play with kids of other ages. Camp is the last place in America where eleven- and twelve-year-olds can get close to nineteen- and twenty-year-olds. It is the only protected space that I know of where children and young adults can develop strong bonds that promote growth in all of them. As I observed in my dedication of Homesick and Happy, counselors leave an “indelible” mark on the lives of kids. Campers also give their counselors life-long lessons in wisdom, patience, and leadership.

Best,

Michael G. Thompson

The single most effective thing that camp counselors can do for children who suffer from homesick feelings is to do what they do best, namely to have fun with kids and create a socially safe environment where children can make friends. The traditional wisdom that you can cure homesickness by distracting them with games, contests, skits, or singing — the traditional staples of camp — is correct. The vast majority of children report very high levels of happiness at camp, rating their experience an eight or nine on a ten-point satisfaction scale. You may recall that ninety-seven percent of children experience at least some occasional homesick feelings at camp, so the fact that the vast majority of children are giving camp extremely high marks suggests that the ordinary camp program is sufficiently entertaining, comforting, and distracting to meet the emotional needs of most children. Camp is fun and the vast majority of campers are what the paradoxical title of this book promises: homesick and happy.

The true magic of camp, however, does not reside in the daily program of camp events — it lies in the relationship between children and other children, and between children and their counselors. Children who have been cared for all of their lives by “old” parents in their thirties and forties, or by “ancient” teachers moving through their forties and fifties, are delighted by the novelty of sharing adventures — and their pain — with their peers and being cared for by appealing young adults in their late teens and early twenties. Any parent who has ever seen how much more effective a friend can be in calming her child under some circumstances, or who has seen her children’s devotion to their teenage babysitter, can imagine what it feels like to a ten-year-old child to find their camp filled with an army of friends and teenage babysitters.

I interviewed two girls at YMCA Camp Chimney Corners who were helping each other with their homesickness and who were also getting help from their assistant counselor. Both girls were surprised they felt as homesick as they did the second year, given that they were one-year veterans. They had come for the two-week session when they were nine. Sitting together in one chair for our interview, they were happily mushed together, constantly touching, always listening to and supporting one another. They were practically finishing each other’s sentence as they described their homesickness:

“You just feel kind of sad,” Livvy said. “You don’t want to talk to anyone else.”
“I just wanted to be alone in my bed,” Julia said. “I haven’t actually cried at night. I normally cry after lunch or after dinner.”

Did they get homesick at any other times? Yes, during Siesta time when they had a lot of time to think and read letters from home. I asked whether the letters were helpful. Julia had a mixed reaction because there were so many of them. “It’s ridiculous,” she said. “There are seventeen to twenty letters.” So, her parents’ efforts to help seemed a bit extreme to her, the number of letters implying, perhaps, a vote of no confidence from far away. Her friend was right there.

They tried to support each other, and mostly, it worked.

“We were both still a little homesick but it was better because we both tried to focus on having fun and it was fine,” Livvy said. “I still comfort her when she’s homesick.”

Julia, who is suffering more, knows that her homesickness is sometimes a burden to her friend, and she is aware that because of the contagion effect, she cannot always be a comfort to Livvy. “It is hard to comfort someone when they’re homesick because that makes me homesick,” she observed. She doesn’t want to overwhelm Livvy, so she looks to the assistant counselor for support: “I found Talia helpful because she could be more focused on me than the rest of the cabin.”

Talia said “all the right things,” and encouraged her to focus on the good things, which helped, Julia said. Once, when she was in the grip of great sadness, Shannon, the director, told her, “There’s nothing I can do now . . . [but] maybe if you stay sad, you can call home in a few days.” This back-up plan to reach her mother had a paradoxical effect on Julia. “Knowing I was able to call her in a day or two made me not want to call her,” she noted.

As Julia’s experience reveals, having a young adult pay attention to you when you are young and homesick can feel wonderful. However, a large quantity of attention is not enough; the quality of attention is important. It is not enough for a counselor to listen to a child and offer generic platitudes: “Lots of kids feel homesick, but they get over it. You’ll be fine in a few days.” Indeed, too-fast and superficial reassurance can be confusing for a child who knows it isn’t going deep enough, but does not know how to educate the counselor to do better.

If, however, the counselor is trained to do a few straightforward things with a homesick child, it can be enormously effective. The counselor has to make some time to listen, she has to ask some questions about what the child misses to empathize with the homesickness, and she needs to normalize the child’s emotions. In other words, she has to acknowledge the pain of the yearnings and bear them alongside the child. That means saying, “Boy, I can see you are really missing home. I can see that it really hurts you. That’s tough.”

This is counterintuitive for most of us. Young people and adults alike see someone in pain and reflexively want to offer quick reassurances. After all, it is hard to sit in the presence of someone else’s pain. It makes you feel a bit helpless and sometimes seriously incompetent. No one likes that feeling. Further, most people are afraid that if they delve into a child’s pain, asking for further details, it will cause the child greater pain. Finally, if you start to ask a crying child to talk
about what makes him or her sad, you cannot be sure how long the process is going to take. So if a camp counselor has a group of children waiting in the cabin, or the group is in transition from activity A to activity B, it may feel ill-advised to invite a child to talk more. Things cannot always be brought to a complete stop. In my experience, if you make empathic contact with a child and say something that truly acknowledges the child’s pain, then it can be relatively easy to say, “I really want to talk to you about this, but we’ve got to get up to the dining hall. Do you think you can talk more about this after dinner?”

After dinner, or when there is more time, the counselor needs to ask the camper some questions about what the child misses and listen to some of the child’s stories. If a child feels that his or her homesickness is seen and acknowledged, that will be of significant help to most children. It cannot be done in a rush, though it doesn’t have to turn into a one-hour therapy session every time. There must be a fairness principle at work; all the campers need the counselors’ time.

A quick check-in helps most campers with mild homesickness, and sometimes a group discussion can do the trick: a group conversation at bedtime, for example. One counselor said that when her whole group of girls was showing signs of homesickness, she had them all describe their bedrooms to each other and to her, in minute detail. She also described her own room at home. The girls felt enormously comforted by the extended opportunity to share these details of home. Other counselors, usually young men, tell me that they had the whole group describe their favorite meals. To paraphrase the axiom about an army marching on its stomach, it turns out that one way to boys’ hearts is through imagining what they wish they had in their stomachs.

For campers who are experiencing above-average levels of homesickness, it is important to help them think through what they themselves have found helpful. Did the letter from home help when it first arrived? Perhaps the child could read it again, or read it out loud to you. Are there things that a child wants to say to his mom and dad? You can suggest that he write another letter or even, if he is crying, take some dictation. Write down his or her thoughts. I learned from my psychotherapy practice that it is enormously helpful to a child to say what he wishes he could say to his parents with you listening. Write it down and hand him the piece of paper when he is finished. Perhaps he or she can later put those thoughts in a letter, or maybe not. But having expressed them out loud will help.

But what about the one in five campers who experience significant distress? And what about that six percent whose homesickness gets more severe as the session goes on? What can younger counselors do for a seriously homesick camper? Naturally, most new and younger counselors will turn to the village leader, the scout leader, or the camp director for the simple reason that they have more time and more experience handling tough cases.

For children in significant distress, it can be comforting to feel that they are in the hands of someone older and wiser. A gray-headed person may be able to speak with the authority of a parent, or be able to speak to a child about a phone call he or she had with the parent about the situation. It is enormously comforting to children to know that the people who are taking care of them are communicating their situation to their parents. For many children, that is sufficient to give them the courage to stay at camp.
In those rare instances when a child’s homesickness is completely debilitating, it is the camp director who is best positioned to make the decision that a child is too homesick to stay. No one likes the idea of the shortened session. As much as the child wants to go home, he or she doesn’t want to feel like a failure in front of peers who are able to remain at camp. Parents of a camper who has to leave camp early often feel like failures as well. Why is their child not capable of making it away from home? Did they cultivate excessive anxiety or dependence in their son or daughter? I don’t think so. It just doesn’t always work out that first or second summer.

When you consider that ninety-nine percent of children succeed at camp, when you reflect on the fact that a majority of the most homesick children return to some sleep-away camp the following year, you have to admire the courage of children. They understand intuitively that leaving home is a challenge they have to master sooner or later. Even a failed first attempt is worthy of respect. That is why a “shortened stay” should always be treated as a significant achievement by camp staff and parents. A child should always have a chance to say a warm and dignified good-bye to his or her peers, and should always hear the respect of staff who have witnessed the child’s efforts to master homesickness. You never know: The child who struggles with homesickness and has to leave camp at thirteen may thrive during a college sophomore year in Italy or Guatemala. The biggest mistake we can make is to count children out. Their development always surprises us.

Reference


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