

WHAT TO DO WITH A HOME SICK SON

Almost all “new” campers and even a few returning campers go through an adjustment phase upon arriving at camp. This is to be expected; even the seasoned overnighiter cannot anticipate all of the realities of a new environment and is bound to wonder what he’s gotten himself into. Suddenly, four or eight weeks seem like a lifetime. Most campers pass through this transition period within hours of arriving at camp. A few take longer. The following are complaints we’ve heard during the first few days of camp:

“I miss my parents.”

“I miss my brother/sister.”

“Everybody else knows each other.”

“There’s nothing to do.”

“I miss my house.”

“I don’t feel well.” (The nurse prescribes Tums, Tylenol and lots of TLC the first week.)

“There’s nobody to talk to.” (Except the other 300 people)

“This camp is fine, I just want to go home.”

“This camp rots, I just want to go home.”

Happily, homesickness usually resolves itself quickly and we have a good laugh about the things that were said the first few days. A few kids-one or two each month-do take longer to adjust. Over the years we have noticed common patterns among homesick campers and have learned- sometimes the hard way-some methods for parents and camp staff to work together to help kids quickly through the adjustment period. Here are some observations and suggestions.

1. The two-week “no telephone” rule is essential. Though it seems like cruel and unusual punishment to some kids, it really does shorten the adjustment time. Your son must be given the opportunity to rely on friends and staff at camp and realize that parents cannot solve his problems. Of course we make exceptions for emergencies. When phone calling is allowed after two weeks, we do not necessarily recommend that you call. We discourage frequent calling as it means your son is spending too much of his time during meals away from the table and distracted from what he is at camp to be doing. Discussing expectations with your son before he leaves for camp will prevent problems and disappointments later on.
2. Do arrange a regular pattern of communication with your son before coming to camp. Try to send off a letter before your son leaves home so that it will arrive at camp soon after he does. Every camper loves mail. Do remember those letters written by campers in the first days of camp are often negative. By the time you get these letters things have most likely changed.

It is difficult for families who have come to rely on instant communications to change habits and yet summer camp is a wonderful opportunity to learn to communicate via the written word. Parents must set the stage however, and write often, even if kids fail to respond frequently. While we make the fax and e-mail available for your incoming correspondence we ask that you limit your use of these to a reasonable number each week and use the postal service as much as possible. (Campers living outside of

North America may use the fax machine to send letters; however, we limit this to about three times a week.)

3. Despite the claim of a few that they are "always miserable"; homesickness is usually an intermittent phenomenon. Kids, however, do choose to write when they feel low. Because kids feel closest to their parents they will unload on you. Over the years we have seen many a smiling and happy camper receive a phone call and return sobbing a few minutes later!
4. Some parents have bargained with their sons and agreed to take them home if they don't like camp after a specified time. While this is done with the best of intentions, the end result is disastrous. We have seen it time and time again. Kids who have elicited this kind of bargain cease to make an effort and focus only on making it through the agreed upon length of time.
5. Your sons are not the only ones being asked to adapt. Having a child away from home can be wrenching, and there is an adjustment phase for parents also. Over the years, many parents have told us about the unexpected feelings of loss they experienced when their son departed. Some sensitive kids perceive their parents' grief and feel guilty for enjoying themselves away from home. These kids need added reassurance that all is well on the home front.
6. It is essential for parents to give kids the message that they can and will adjust. As in most things, a "this is hard, but you can do it" attitude is enormously encouraging. Feeling sorry for your son will tell him to feel sorry for himself. Remember that your son is not being expected to handle this by himself. There are people here to help him through a difficult time. We work hard to help those few unsure ones find their niche at Keewaydin. Have faith in us and in yourself for choosing the right camp for your son.

Another great resource on how to prepare your son for camp in a way that minimizes homesickness is "*The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success*" by Chris Thurber which can be purchased at the ACA bookstore online or by calling 888-229-5745. If you have concerns about your son's adjustment, please feel free to contact his wigwam director or Peter Hare.