

MISSING HOME
“HOMESICKNESS” – A MOUNTAIN MEADOW GUIDE FOR PARENTS
Learning to recognize Mountain Meadow Ranch as a “home away from home”

What is homesickness? Technically speaking, it is the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home. It's characterized by acute longing and preoccupying thoughts of home and other beloved objects.

Homesickness / Missing Home is a normal part of growing up and is to be expected in varying degrees. Missing home is not a sickness but certainly is part of being human. It's just missing home and learning to cope with being away from Family Friends and Home. We are very open about “home sickness” at Mountain Meadow and discuss it as a camp family to help our campers and sometimes our staff to face and understand how they feel. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a Camp's physical distance from a child's home has no impact at all on whether a child experiences homesickness while at camp and is not a predictor of success at camp. Homesickness is something that every camp will deal with every summer. It's an inevitable phenomenon.

A lot of life is lived at camp and life has periods of loneliness, unhappiness, anxiety, sometimes even deprivation and depression. No one can be completely free from conflict. A common theme oft discussed around the camp fire at Mountain Meadow is that “life is generally what you make of it.” Although have no doubt that coming to Mountain Meadow is huge fun and worthwhile, we feel a responsibility to make sure that campers all understand that it won't be fun every single minute, that there will be problems to solve, feelings of worry or sadness to overcome, insecurities to work on...and that these problems and feelings are NORMAL.

It is within the capacity of any camper to accept the fact that school, sports, scouts, camp, family life, and even life in general, won't always be perfect. We wouldn't denigrate a homesick child's feelings by denying that they exist, or by denying that the reasons for them exist. "Yes, you're homesick. It doesn't feel good, but it's normal, and sometimes even an appropriate feeling."

Most cases of homesickness fade away by the third or fourth day of camp, if treated with a little attention and recognition. We try to help the camper to make a place for him/herself within the community, reminding them that MMR is their “home away from home.” The extreme case requires a therapy that involves a cooperative effort between parents, campers, counselors and we the directors. The parents' role is critical. We have never lost a child to homesickness in cases where the parents have been an informed, supportive, understanding part of the treatment team. Co-owner/Director Jody Ellena is our resident TLC Director and has had amazing success conquering every imaginable homesick-related situation. As a mother of three, she can readily empathize. Do not hesitate to contact her. Camp is a comfortable place for this personal growth to take place and your camper needs all of our encouragement and support.

The worst thing a parent can say is "Darling, I know you're going to love it. Just try it a few more days (or a week, or two weeks, or whatever) and if you still feel homesick, 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.

There are two other reasons why such pick-up deals usually backfire. First, the deal sends a negative message. The message is "Mom and Dad don't think you can make it through Camp. We think you will be so homesick that the only solution will be to leave Camp." They also give campers a powerful, home-related thought to dwell on: The Pick-Up. Every time your child encounters a stressful situation at Camp, or feels a twinge of homesickness, their thoughts turn to the pick-up. "My parents said that if I don't like Camp, they'd come to pick me up." This thought becomes a mental crutch. The camper leans on it, rather than developing skills to cope with their feelings.

If before camp your child asks you straight out, "Mom/Dad, will you come pick me up if I get really homesick and hate Camp?" a good response could be, "You sound a little nervous about going to Camp. But I think you're really going to love it. It's normal to feel nervous before you go. If you do have some homesick feelings at Camp, there will be many people who can help you through those feelings. Even though you might have some homesick feelings, I think you're going to have a great time at Mountain Meadow."

When your child tells you from camp they are feeling homesick the best thing a parent can say is "Honey, I know you're feeling homesick. 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 and missing home. But you will adjust, it will get easier and I do expect you to stay there, and deal with the feelings you have. We'll call you regularly, we'll write to you often, we're available to talk to you, but you need to see through the commitment you made." Parents need to let their children know that camp is a commitment, and that they are people who respect and honor their commitments. They aren't quitters, and they get satisfaction from following through, even though it might not always be easy all the time.

One of the reasons it is difficult for parents to insist that their children follow through with camp or school is that homesickness is terribly flattering. Often, parents have as much or more difficulty separating from their kids as the kids do from their parents. When our four year old says, "Mommy, I love you and I'm going to stay with you forever," we laugh at the warm good feelings that washed over us. But would we want them to stay with us forever...? Intellectually, of course not. But emotionally...? So we parents sometimes build homesickness into the agenda, and sometimes feel hurt/disappointment if our best beloved trudges happily off to camp without a backward glance. Another difficulty is that we parents have sometimes been programmed to believe that we are bad parents unless we can make our children happy all the time. It's not rational either... no one is happy all the time. But if we CAN relieve misery, if we can kiss away the hurt, if it's within our power to give joy, shouldn't we do so?

Child psychologists have analyzed the developmental stages of children, and the important/difficult needs to be met at each stage. While soothing miseries, alleviating pain, and relieving discomfort are appropriate for infants and toddlers, helping deal with frustration, disappointment, conflict and sadness are appropriate for school age children. Giving children

confidence in their ability to cope with the “ups and downs” of daily life is important. Giving children experience in handling the appropriate degree of discomfort and problems is being a good parent, because it is helping children grow up, be independent, be separate and strong.

Over the years we have seen many children testing their effect on their parents, and testing their own capacity to separate. The camper who practically vomits through his/her heartbreaking sobs on the phone to the parents, finishes the call, picks up his/her towel and skips off to the lagoon as if late to a party and the poor parents are quivering masses of guilt and uncertainty at the other end of the phone. Homesickness isn't 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 while the parents only hear the miserable moments on the phone or in the most recent letter saying, "Take me away, I can't stand this place, if you don't come and get me I'll run away." It's important to remember that these moments do not a summer make. It's insensitive to remind your child that they only feel miserable some of the time, and it's important to acknowledge the very real feelings that are being felt at the moment. But some perspective helps. That's why it is important a level of trust and communication between you the parents and we the directors be established and maintained. Together we can provide the best help for homesickness.

Once the option of going home is closed, the work of adjusting can begin. And in fact, dealing with homesickness can be done effectively even before the decision is made to come to MMR. Prior to the start of Camp, talk with your child about homesickness. Most children are pretty good at predicting how strong their own homesick feelings will be, and talking about homesickness won't cause it, or make it worse. Let your child know that there might be times when they will feel a little homesick, even though they are having a great time at camp and that these homesick feelings are perfectly normal. It is crucial that you maintain a very positive attitude. Accentuate the wonderful opportunities for new friendships and new experiences that camp will provide. Friends are easy to make at camp and there is a lot of help when trying new things. Your child needs to know that you think he or she will be a great camper. Campers need the confidence of their parents and their enthusiastic encouragement for a positive camping experience. Let them know that there are lots of things to think about or do to feel better if he/she feels homesick. Many campers have found that the following points help to reduce homesickness at camp:

~**Do something fun** - staying busy at Camp, in activities and with friends in between activities.

~**Do something to get your focus off of yourself** - Seek someone around camp who needs encouragement or help. Love and care for one of the camp animals. Get involved with the animal care program. Make something for your counselor or a friend. Volunteer to help with clean-up or gardening. These activities make a camper feel needed, important, and involved in the community.

~**Do something to feel closer to home** - writing letters to family, looking at pictures and reading letters.

~**Think about the good side of being at Camp** - looking on the bright side makes a huge difference. Think of all the interesting and novel things you can do at camp that you can't do at home. Pick something on the calendar to look forward to.

~**Try to be happy and have fun** - try to change the way that you feel...sometimes just thinking

about feeling good is enough to change your mood.

~Remind yourself that Camp isn't really that long – 19 days isn't really that long a time...school lasts about 40 weeks! Thinking about how short Camp is can make a big difference.

~Talk with someone who can help you feel better - at Camp, there are many people around you who are there for support. Talk to Jody, Chip or your counselors. They are there to help you through tough times and they are experts at helping kids get over their homesickness!

These are all ideas that counselors and the camp director will suggest too, and help to facilitate. But Talking about these coping strategies in advance with your child are great ways to diminish the chances that your child will have significant homesickness while at Camp his/her parents.

Here are some things you can do as a parent to help reduce the potential that your child will feel homesick and will reduce the severity in the event they experience some homesickness:

~Keep doubts to yourself – Do not say things that will make your child worry about how you will feel when they are away at Camp. If you are uncertain about your child's ability to cope with homesickness, do not share these doubts with your child. Your child must only hear positive messages from you their parents. When they hear that you believe they can do it, they'll be far more likely to succeed.

~Send your child a letter at Camp before the first day - receiving mail at Camp helps children to feel loved and remembered. Personal, positive, encouraging letters from home are often the cure for almost any illness.

~Do not make deals about early pick-ups! Parents occasionally make pick-up deals in an innocent attempt to reduce pre-camp anxiety. Too much experience teaches us that this is not a good strategy. It is normal for young people to feel nervous and excited as Camp approaches and for campers to ask themselves whether Camp is such a good idea in the first place.

Unfortunately, some well-meaning parents have tried to comfort their child by saying something like, "Well, if you still feel homesick, we will come to Camp and pick you up." This promise almost guarantees that the child will be homesick. They inevitably remember the discussion and hold onto your promise no matter how wonderful their camp experience.

We have learned through our fifty-three summers that without the parent's cooperation in their campers learning to cope with homesickness, the chances of success are greatly diminished. The loss is potentially many fold: the child now has uncertainties about their capacity to handle independence, they lose out on a great learning experience from which they had already begun to gain many new skills and friends; it may be a long time before the child feels ready to break away. The loss is ours too. The amount of emotional and psychic energy that the staff and campers put into helping the homesick camper creates close connections between them and that camper. The invested energy pays off in great emotional involvement and deeper bonding within the camp family when homesickness is overcome. We hate to see campers fail, and we miss them when they leave early. The parents also lose... not only financially, but in the disappointment of seeing their child miss out on an experience that most other youngsters handle with assurance, and in the last-minute change in plans it means they have to provide alternative activities for their child or spending the rest of the summer sitting around the house board. It

would be good if their experience could help other parents handle the issue of homesickness more successfully.

Learning to cope with homesickness is a huge skill your child will use for the rest of their lives. Once children recognize the feeling of homesickness, cope with it, and survive a brief separation from home, their confidence about future separations skyrockets. Homesickness is a giant they must conquer at some point in their lives to spring successfully into adulthood. They gain an independence and self-confidence equipping them to grow and conquer the other giants waiting throughout the rest of their lives. Like exercise, it may hurt a little, but it makes you stronger. There is no better place for a young person to see this independence blossom than here at Mountain Meadow Ranch.