

# Helping with Homesickness

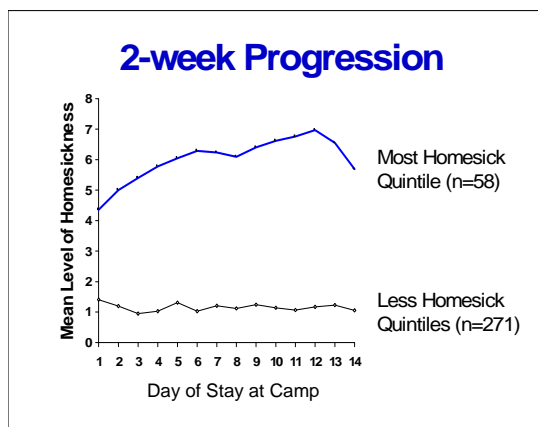
**Definition:** Homesickness is distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home. Homesickness is characterized by acute longing and preoccupying thoughts of home and attachment objects (parents, pets, friends). Different people miss different things about home.

**Symptoms:** Symptoms of homesickness include depression, anxiety, withdrawn behavior, somatic complaints (infrequently), and acting-out behaviors (rarely). Cabin leaders are pretty good at detecting moderate and severe cases of homesickness, but milder cases often go undetected.

**Prevalence:** More than 95% of all campers report having some homesick feelings on at least one day of their camp stay. It's normal! Some 20% report moderate or severe levels of homesickness. Only 7% have severe depressive and anxious symptoms along with their homesick feelings.

**Behaviors:** Homesickness is most commonly associated with withdrawn behaviors, anxious and depressed behaviors, and somatic complaints. Surprisingly, the data suggest that homesick girls show more acting-out behaviors than homesick boys. Not all homesick children look homesick.

**Progression:** Conventional wisdom held that homesickness usually went away after the first few days at camp. It's not that simple. As it turns out, the most homesick children begin their stay with a high level of homesickness, and, without any intervention, it can get worse and worse until just before they go home. (See graph below.) When campers know returning home is imminent, the severity of their homesickness decreases.



**Predictors:** There are a variety of factors that predict homesickness. These include Experience factors, Personality factors, Family factors, and Attitude factors. Understanding these predictors can give you insight into individual cases of homesickness. This insight will help you tailor a treatment plan. Some things can be changed; others cannot.

**Experience factors:** Children are more likely to get homesick if they are young, have little previous separation experience, and have no previous experience at your camp.

**Personality factors:** Children are more likely to get homesick if they perceive low control over their own emotions, are anxious or depressed in the months before camp, and are insecurely attached (i.e., they are unsure whether their caregivers will give them love when they need it).

**Family factors:** Children are more likely to get homesick if they felt forced to come to camp, if their parents expressed doubt or anxiety about their going to camp, or if there is something about their home situation that makes them worried, such as an upcoming move or divorce.

**Attitude factors:** Children are more likely to get homesick if they have low expectations of camp, believe their homesickness will be strong, and have a negative first impression of camp.



**Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, ABPP**  
Psychologist, Author, Consultant, Educator

603.557.8100  
chris@campspirit.com  
CampSpirit.com

Please use with  
permission until  
→ 12/31/08 ←

**Treatment:** If you read the previous sections, you can see that there are some risk factors for homesickness that you can't change at all. For example, you can't do much about a camper's parents. However, there are many things you and your homesick camper *can* do. Read on.

## **EIGHT STEPS TO LESS HOMESICKNESS:**

- 1. Orient and Welcome.** Orienting your campers begins before camp starts with a phone call from a leader, a camp brochure or DVD, or other materials detailing daily camp life. Before your campers arrive, memorize their names. This will make them feel welcome and...you guessed it!...*at home*. To make campers feel even more at home, help them customize their bunk with a name card. Maintain close contact with campers during the first day. You are their substitute parent.
- 2. Integrate.** Immediately integrating your campers into camp gives them a good first impression of camp, gets them psyched up, and gives them a sense of control. It's uncomfortable to be clueless for very long. To enhance integration, introduce campers to one another, make sure schedules and maps of camp are posted in visible locations, and tell kids what's coming up next on the schedule.
- 3. Provide Social Support.** Homesick kids are lonely. Normalize their experience and empathize with their feelings. Don't let a homesick camper monopolize your time, but show you care. Set time limits at the start of your check-ins and encourage homesick campers to get involved in all aspects of camp life. Try pairing them with veteran campers who can also provide social support.
- 4. Promote a Connection with Home.** Help campers write letters. Make time during the day for everyone to write. Give your campers the return address for camp so they get a letter back.
- 5. Assess Coping.** Learn how your homesick campers are coping by asking this simple question: "Tell me all the things you think or do to help make things better when you're feeling homesick." This tells you their coping *method*. To assess their coping *goals*, ask "And what did you hope might happen when you \_\_\_\_\_?" Help campers cope in adaptive, realistic ways.
- 6. Analyze Coping.** Is your homesick camper coping by trying to change something that can't be changed? Or has he given up completely, thinking that nothing will help? The most effective way to cope is to adjust to things you can't change (such as the actual length of a session) and change what you can (like whether you participate in activities or not). It works, but it takes time, dedication to feeling better, and your help.
- 7. Teach Coping.** Here's what kids say works best: Doing something fun to forget about homesick feelings; Doing something (writing a letter) to feel closer to home; Talking with someone to help them feel better; Thinking about the good side of things (activities, friends) to feel better; Thinking that camp is actually pretty short to make time go by faster; Trying not to think about home and loved ones to forget about homesickness; Thinking about loved ones to figure out what they would say to help. *What doesn't work?* Wishful thinking, giving up, getting mad, running away.
- 8. Encourage & Follow-Up.** To prevent rumination, keep most of your conversations with homesick campers to a 15-minute maximum. Say, "I'm certain that if you keep trying hard, you'll be less homesick by this time tomorrow. Let's check in then and see what worked the best. For now, let's get going to the next activity. Staying busy is one of the things that helps most kids feel better." (Of course, don't forget your follow-up meeting with that camper in 24 hours.)



**Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, ABPP**  
Psychologist, Author, Consultant, Educator

603.557.8100  
chris@campspirit.com  
CampSpirit.com

Please use with  
permission until  
→ 12/31/08 ←

# Homesickness Management

Analyzing In-Camp Strategies for Supporting Homesick Campers & Staff

Sample Dialogue #1	What's working? What's not working?
<p>Camper: I hate this place. It sucks. (Starting to tear up.) I want to go home...now!</p> <p>You: What do you mean it sucks? This place is awesome.</p> <p>Camper: I mean there's nothing to do.</p> <p>You: (sarcastically) <i>Nothing</i> to do? Right.</p> <p>Camper: See? Not even <i>you</i> care. No one does.</p> <p>You: I'm sorry. That's not what I meant. But how can you say that you hate camp?</p> <p>Camper: Well, I'm not having any fun.</p> <p>You: Has there been <i>anything</i> you've liked?</p> <p>Camper: Well...I guess siesta is OK. I like to read.</p> <p>You: That's a start. We have siesta every day, and there are other free times during the day when you can read.</p> <p>Camper: Really? Like when?</p> <p>You: Well, if you don't go to General Swim, it's OK to hang out in the division and read. But you might also want to find a buddy and go to swim.</p> <p>Camper: No one wants to go to swim with me.</p> <p>You: Maybe they don't know you very well. How about if I help find you a buddy for General Swim this afternoon?</p> <p>Camper: OK...I guess.</p> <p>You: It's hard sometimes to be in a new place where you don't know anybody.</p> <p>Camper: Just like in my neighborhood.</p> <p>You: What do you mean?</p> <p>Camper: Well, we just moved to Portland this year and I don't know anybody. All my friends are back in Seattle.</p> <p>You: That's rough. I wonder if there are any other kids here from Portland.</p> <p>Camper: I wouldn't know.</p> <p>You: But I could find out for you.</p> <p>Camper: Can <i>you</i> go to General Swim with me?</p> <p>You: Actually, I have to lifeguard during swim, but I'll see you down there, OK?</p> <p>Camper: OK.</p>	



**Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, ABPP**  
 Psychologist, Author, Consultant, Educator

6 0 3 . 5 5 7 . 8 1 0 0  
 chris@campspirit.com  
 CampSpirit.com

Please use with  
 permission until  
 → 12/31/08 ←

Sample Dialogue #2	What's working? What's not working?
<p>Camper: (Sobbing). I just want to go home.  You: You sound really sad to be here.  Camper: I want to go <i>home</i>.  You: You know, everybody misses something about home when they're away. The way you feel is normal.  Camper: It's <i>not</i> normal. It's terrible. I don't want to be at camp. I want to be <i>home</i>.  You: It's hard to imagine being happy at camp.  Camper: I want to go home.  You: Let's talk first about what might make camp more fun for you. Do you want to feel better?  Camper: I want to go <i>home</i>.  You: There are lots of different things you can think or do to help make things better when you feel homesick. You might feel now like the only way to feel better is to go home, but there <i>are</i> other ways to feel better. I've got a few ideas for you.  Camper: Like <i>what</i>?  You: Well, tell me what you've thought or done so far to help make things better.  Camper: I try not to think about home but I always <i>am</i> thinking about home.  You: What about writing letters?  Camper: I don't have any stamps.  You: Well that's a cinch. I can lend you some stamps. Would writing a letter home help make things better?  Camper: Only if I got a letter back.  You: I'm sure your mom or dad will write back. What else have you tried when you're feeling homesick?  Camper: I like to play soccer. But I can do that at home. I want to go home.  You: You <i>can</i> play soccer at home, but at home you don't have all these other kids to play with. Plus, at camp you also have the beautiful lake, the ropes course, the archery range, and all kinds of other cool stuff. And camp only lasts for a few weeks. Home will still be there when camp is over, right?  Camper: I guess so.  You: I like your new attitude.</p>	



**Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, ABPP**  
Psychologist, Author, Consultant, Educator

6 0 3 . 5 5 7 . 8 1 0 0  
chris@campspirit.com  
CampSpirit.com

Please use with  
permission until  
→ 12/31/08 ←

# Staff Training on Homesickness Intervention

Principle	Action Plans
<p>1) You—the director or senior staff member who coordinates staff training—must understand homesickness phenomenology.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Attend a stunningly well-researched workshop given by the nation's leading expert on homesickness.</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>2) Staff must understand homesickness phenomenology. Without an understanding of risk factors, chronology, and coping, staff will rely on intuition, much of which is wrong.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Include "Helping with Homesickness" in your staff training manual.</i></li> <li>• <i>Discuss the myths and facts about homesickness.</i></li> <li>• <i>Review your camp's policies on phone calls</i></li> </ul>
<p>3) Staff must feel confident in their ability to help a homesick camper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>During staff training week, practice well-designed role-plays based on actual case studies; use real children if possible.</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>4) Staff must feel confident in their ability to coach an anxious parent of a homesick camper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>During staff training week, practice well-designed role-plays based on actual case studies; use real parents if possible.</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>5) Staff must be able to rely on senior staff for advice and support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Explain your camp's collaborative hierarchy.</i></li> <li>• <i>Demonstrate how a discussion between a front-line cabin leader and a unit leader might sound when discussing a HS camper</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p>6) Staff must know how to assess the need for a shortened stay, and how to orchestrate a shortened stay.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Include "Guidelines for Considering a Shortened Stay" in your staff training manual.</i></li> <li>• <i>During staff training week, practice well-designed role-plays based on actual case studies; use real children if possible.</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Additional staff resources are included in "The Summer Camp Handbook," available at the ACA Bookstore, your local book seller, amazon.com, or by calling 800-330-5851. Also visit [CampSpirit.com](http://CampSpirit.com) for updated info.



**Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, ABPP**  
Psychologist, Author, Consultant, Educator

603.557.8100  
[chris@campspirit.com](mailto:chris@campspirit.com)  
[CampSpirit.com](http://CampSpirit.com)

Please use with  
permission until  
→ 12/31/08 ←