By Eva Lee Henderson

HELP FOR THE HOMESICK

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'll be leaving for camp soon. I want to go, but I'll miss you. This may sound silly, but will you be okay while I'm gone?

What if I don't like it there? What if I don't make any friends or my counselor doesn't understand me the way you do

I know camp is good for me. And it's fun too. But leaving home for a whole week is hard. I want to do well. To be strong—to make it. If I do, I know I'll be proud of myself. You'll be proud of me, too!

Love,
Chris

This letter may never be written; the feelings may never be put into words. However, as a child leaves home, even for a short, exciting week of camp, he or she may have some hesitations. Parents can help ease this transition time or, unknowingly, make it more difficult. With the right approach the dreaded work homesick need not be a huge barrier to overcome and conquer. Parents can direct their child in preparing for the camp experience, for being away from home and for accomplishing a growth stage.

Homesickness is very real to the camper. The child may feel frightened and lonely and may suffer real pain such as stomachaches or headaches. At times, campers may feel guilty for leaving their parents. They may direct anger at themselves because they miss their mothers. They may become angry with their mothers for not being there.

In many cases, a child is so dependent on the parent that he or she does not know if coping is possible away from the parent. The child needs help developing self-confidence, assuring their children that they themselves can cope while the child is gone. A parental display of tears, fears, loneliness, and anxiety may make a child feel guilty for leaving. To reassure parents, the child will resist leaving or write home to complain of camp or to admit homesickness. Parents should acknowledge the child's concern and the pain involved. At the same time, they should express confidence that the child will cope and succeed, stating positive, realistic expectations they have for the child.

A parent who has trouble dealing with separation from the child still needs to allow the camper the freedom to experience success. Letters should be positive, not full of miss yous. Most camps do not allow phone calls to campers except in an emergency. A child who is coping well with being away from home can suddenly assume guilt if the parent is not coping equally well.

Remember, homesickness is not a "good sign" that the child misses the parents. It indicates a lack of self-confidence. In the camp setting, counselors are trained to handle homesickness by keeping each camper busy and happy. By acknowledging the camper's feelings and helping the camper overcome homesickness, rather than give into it, counselors help the camper have a successful confidence-building experience. Sticking it out for the camp term can be a more positive learning experience than giving in and going home. Even if a camper succumbs to homesickness and fails to make it through the week, counselors and parents should encourage camp attendance again next year.

This will reassure the child that he or she will outgrow the homesickness.

Parents can help ease this transition time or, unknowingly, make it more difficult. With the right approach, the dreaded word homesick need not be a huge barrier to overcome and conquer.

Positive Planning

A camper who says he is being "sent" to camp has a different attitude from one who is "going" to camp. Camp directors often see the result of improper planning which may lessen the child's enjoyment of the camp week or promote homesickness. When a camper has participated in the decision of choosing a camp, he or she can look forward to the activities that friends or the camp's literature describe, be it a special overnight trip, a cookout, or a daily horseback ride. Once at camp, an enthusiastic camper will be a good influence on campers struggling with homesickness.

Being promised certain cabinmates, counselors, activities, or use of the phone by the parent, only to find that camp policy or situations don't allow or fulfill those promises, may lead to disappointment or discouragement. If the child needs reassurance, the parent should keep promises reasonable. Parents should read the brochures and letters from camp carefully and know well in advance the policies and procedures for registration, choice of activities, use of phone, request of cabinmates, etc.

Parents should follow this brief list of dos and don'ts for preparation and check-in at camp:

DO involve the child in the selection of the camp.

DON'T make promises you can't control.

DO pack together. Favorite, familiar, and well-marked clothes will most likely return home. Save new clothes for school. Allow the child to pack a familiar toy (perhaps a stuffed animal) that will survive a week at camp.

DON'T plan special family activities the camper will miss while at camp.

DO visit the campsite on opening day, if possible. Meet your child's counselor, talk with the camp director, ask questions.

DON'T openly discuss your child's health concerns with the nurse while your child or other children are present. Do share your concerns privately or in a note attached to the medical form.

DO arrive on time, especially on departure day.

DON'T overburden the infirmary with unnecessary medications. Camp will provide adequate, well-rounded meals, plenty of rest, and a well-equipped infirmary.

DO send prescriptions on normally taken medications in original, well-marked containers. DON'T mix medications or send prescription medications that were not prescribed for the child by a doctor.

DO write to your child while he or she is at camp, or even before your child leaves, so a letter will arrive early in the week.

DO pack pre-addressed, stamped envelopes or postcards so your camper can write to you, too.

Remember, if a camper does become homesick, he or she will survive and will want to overcome this fear. Acknowledge and respect any fears and concerns. Be supportive, not protective. Give encouragement, not sympathy.

Try your hand at a response to the homesick camper.

Dear Chris,
I hope you are learning a lot at camp this week. It may be hard for you, and sometimes you may be scared, but we know you can make it! We love you and want you to have a good time at camp. We are looking forward to hearing all about camp when we see you on Saturday.
Love,
Mom and Dad

When National Camp Administrator Eva Lee Henderson is homesick for her lovely attic apartment and Shih-tzu dog, Flower, during long trips to Camp Cherith camps, we hope she will remember this article.