

How To Make Your Child A Happy Camper

We are looking forward to welcoming your child to Robin Hood this summer! We imagine he or she is experiencing all sorts of emotions as travel day approaches, as you probably are too!

Hopefully, the predominant feelings are those of anticipation and excitement; but, it's also natural to be apprehensive and a little nervous about a few issues including the incidence of homesickness.

It's important to establish the distinction between "missing home/parents/pets/friends" and "homesickness" as they are in fact different.

It is normal to miss people and things we love while we are separated. While at camp, your child will certainly miss you – that is expected. However, he or she will be able to have great fun and be fully involved in camp life **despite that**.

Homesickness, however, is a condition akin to anxiety or depression in adults, and is a result of lack of security. It is a lonely feeling to which there seems no end.

While in the home environment, your child lives within a '**safe circle**' – he/she is surrounded by people and things that are familiar and comfortable, including rules and routines.

When a child comes to camp, they are stepping out of that safe circle into an unknown world – the people are unfamiliar, the rules are new, and the surrounding environment is drastically different.

But there **is** a safe circle at camp complete with wonderful and caring counsellors, great friends, a beautiful setting and endless fun.

The homesick child is the one who is struggling to let go of the 'home' safe circle and transfer to the 'camp' safe circle. He/she is in that 'no mans land' in between the two.

We are determined to build that safe circle around your child as soon and as seamlessly as possible.

We will:

- **Show we care** – by empathising with them, and offering our love and support.
- **Keep him/her busy and involved** – focussing attention on the fun things that they are doing and will be doing.
- **Help them cope** – letting them know their feelings are normal, and offering strategies and advice on how to feel better.
- **Give special attention to him/her at 'vulnerable' times** (e.g. rest time, bedtime)
- **Keep YOU informed of how he/she is progressing**

During our staff Orientation we spend time discussing homesickness and the various methods of combating it.

The vast majority of children cross that zone between the two 'safe circles' with little problem. Some children, especially returning campers, are virtually in the camp safe circle before they get here!

Prevention is better than cure...

Through our own experience and supported by studies, it is evident that most homesickness can be prevented. If your child is well prepared for camp then transition can be seamless and exciting.

A well-prepared camper is one who:

- **Has experience sleeping away from home/in company of others.**
- **Has been involved in and supports the decision to go to camp.**
- **Knows about the camp, some of its people, its facilities and basic routines.**
- **Has parents who show pride and confidence in their child's ability to rise to the challenge of camp.**
- **Has parents who may be anxious and worried about how THEY might cope with the separation, but do not let their child be aware of these anxieties.**
- **Knows that his/her counselors can and will help in times of need.**
- **Knows that low feelings associated with separation are normal.**

Here are some tips and advice on how YOU can help to ease the transition in the few weeks prior to camp, and also during the first few days of camp.

1. If it is going to be a first time sleeping away from home, arrange for your child to sleep over at a friend's house, or even have friends sleep over at your house – have everyone sleep on the basement floor, or even in the yard! Create a 'mini-camp' at home!
2. At the end of this article is some basic information about the Robin Hood routine. If they haven't seen the Robin Hood DVD, sit down and view it with them. One of our counselors or older campers will be in touch with your child (if they haven't already!) to help prepare them for camp. Encourage them to reply with questions.
3. Be positive – let them know how proud you are that they are setting out on this adventure, and how you share their excitement. Discuss the fact that there might be 'low' times when they feel sad. Emphasise that they can always talk to their counselor if they feel sad; that the counselor knows plenty of special ways to make them feel better, and that it is perfectly OK to feel low sometimes.
4. **Avoid the 'get out clause':** "If you don't like it, you can come home." This can be amazingly damaging, and actually sends out some confusing and counter-productive messages.
 - It undermines your confidence in your child's ability to cope with adversity.
 - It questions whether you really are ready to send your child to camp.
 - Your child will be quick to use it, even when the smallest things go wrong, and you will have the choice of either carrying it through, or backing out of it; both of which will be extremely stressful.

Make it clear that whatever period they have signed up for will be seen out. After that, they can make the decision on whether or not to return, or even extend their stay.

5. As camp time approaches, YOU will become anxious. Try not to transmit that to your child. Don't emphasise the fact that you will miss them while they are at camp. This may sound harsh, but the message here is avoiding the **emphasis** on missing them. Support words like "we will miss you so much" with "but we will be so proud and happy that you will be having so much fun making friends and learning new skills."
6. If you can, avoid long, protracted goodbyes, whether you are dropping your child at airports, buses or bringing them to camp. The longer it takes to say goodbye, the more anxious your child becomes, and actually he/she is picking up on YOUR anxiety during this time.
7. After camp begins, you will be anxious to know how well your child has settled. Feel free to call DC or Jamie, or any of the administration. We will be happy to let you know how he/she is doing.
8. We **discourage** verbal contact between you and your child, **particularly** if they are having problems adjusting. We have found that phone conversations with parents create a 'virtual' home safe circle that is very short-lived, and in fact makes the problem worse. This is why we have a 'no phone calls' policy for the first two weeks. Both you and your child will find this tough, but it will make that "I am happy and having a great time" phone call so much more special when it comes!
9. Be wary of that tear-stained letter pleading for you to come and pick them up. Three or four days will have elapsed since the writing of said letter, and it is highly likely that things will have markedly improved in the interim. Feel free to call us just to make sure! When you reply to such a letter, make sure the emphasis is on how proud you are of your child, and how you understand how it must have been difficult to adjust. Encourage your child to let you know in their next letter about the activities/friends/counselors etc.

There is no magical cure for homesickness, but we will work together to make your child a genuinely happy camper. Indeed we have many existing campers (and staff!) who were miserable for the first day or two of *their* Robin Hood lives, who have been returning ever since.

The polar opposite of homesickness is 'campsickness', and yes it really does exist! It's when a camper struggles to return to the 'home' safe circle after camp finishes. Parents of seasoned campers will know exactly what I mean. In a bizarre sense, our aim is for a camper who experiences homesickness at the beginning of the summer to experience campsickness at the end of it!

A message to our new campers:

We are really excited about welcoming you to Robin Hood!

As camp time gets nearer, I'll bet you are wondering about all sorts of things to do with camp. Here's just a little bit of info for you, so that you know what to expect.

- When you arrive, one of your counselors will be there to meet you and take you to your cabin.
- At this time you will meet the other kids and counselors in your group, and you will probably play some fun games.
- After a great dinner, there will be an awesome activity organised for your group.
- Then it will be time for a cozy night's sleep before the fun begins the next day.

Here is an example of a typical day at Robin Hood:

7.30am	Wake up!
8.00	Breakfast - fruit, toast, cereal, bagels, eggs, juice, etc.
8.45	Time to clean up the cabin
9.30	1 st activity period - swimming? Archery? Dance? Who knows?
10.30	2 nd activity period - maybe soccer or sailing!
12.30	Lunch - could be hotdogs, pizza, salad, soup, pasta, etc.
1.15	Rest hour - it's your time to relax (or play ping pong with a friend!)
2.00	Another activity period - could be waterskiing! Or gym!
3.00	Yet another activity period - woodshop or perhaps riflery
4.00	Snack time - you'll be hungry and thirsty!
4.15	Yes, another activity period - softball or canoeing or crafts?
5.15	General swim - time for some fun in the water!
6.00	Dinner - Chef Nicki is waiting to serve up a treat!
7.00	Evening activity - always a surprise from your Group Leader.

The activities mentioned are just examples. Your Group Leader will tell you your actual schedule each day.