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New thinking needed on helping kids avoid or cope with homesickness, experts say

Newly published report gives children's doctors & parents specific guidance for helping kids deal with summer camp, hospitalization and other separations

ANN ARBOR, MI — A new report urges parents and children's doctors to change their thinking about homesickness among children, to see it as a nearly universal but highly preventable and treatable phenomenon — rather than an unavoidable part of childhood.

The report, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, gives parents and physicians specific guidance to help anticipate and lessen the distress that homesickness can cause among kids and teens at summer camps, hospitals, boarding schools and colleges.

The paper's authors are a clinical psychologist at one of the nation's leading boarding schools, Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, and a University of Michigan physician who specializes in camp health issues. They're also old friends who first met at summer camp more than 25 years ago.

It's the first time that the evidence about homesickness prevention and treatment, which has been gathered through years of psychological studies, has been presented for pediatricians and family doctors to use.

The authors, and the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health that sponsored the report, hope that those physicians will add homesickness counseling to children's camp and school physicals, and to the care of hospitalized children. They also point out special issues for children who have attention deficit disorder or developmental issues — for example, the importance of continuing the use of medications for those conditions while at camp and not taking a "drug holiday."

"For over 100 years camps and schools have patted homesick kids on the back, tried to keep them busy and hoped it will go away," says lead author Christopher Thurber, Ph.D., the staff psychologist at Exeter, research consultant to the American Camp Association and author of a camp handbook for parents. "But research shows that it's healthier, and more effective to think about prevention. This report aims to get the message to parents and those who are taking care of kids before they go to camp."

One of the basic tips for parents and doctors is to talk to kids ahead of any separation, whether it's for camp, college, or a hospital stay of even a few days. "What parents say — and what pediatricians say — beforehand matters, and is very important for the intensity of homesickness," says Edward Walton, M.D., a U-M Health System assistant professor of emergency medicine and pediatrics who serves on the board of the American Camp Association and was lead author of a 2005 AAP guideline on summer camp health that was produced in conjunction with the ACA.

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One of the most important things for parents and doctors to recognize, and to say to kids before any separation, is that it's normal, not strange, to feel homesick. In fact, research has shown that 90 percent of children attending summer camp feel some levels of homesickness and that 20 percent face a serious level of distress that — if untreated — worsens over time and interferes with their ability to benefit from a camp experience.

Thurber's recent research compared the effectiveness of key preparation tools to camps' standard preparation. The results showed that a combination of coaching parents and educating children about effective coping actually lowered the intensity of first-year campers' homesickness by 50 percent, on average.

The ACA now publishes a DVD-CD set, “The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success,” that makes these evidence-based homesickness prevention strategies publicly available for the first time.

In children whose separation from their parents is sudden and unplanned, such as hospitalization, as many as half experience moderate to severe homesickness that can interfere with their functioning. In fact, says Thurber, special care needs to be taken with children who are hospitalized for an indefinite amount of time, because even a casual remark by a physician or nurse about when the child might be able to go home can cause severe distress and even interfere with care if that date arrives and the child is still in the hospital.

For more routine separations, such as the 1 million children who go away to school or the 12 million who attend sleepaway camp each year, homesickness can get in the way of the important character-building lessons that these experiences bring.

Some of the tips for parents and children's doctors:

- Involve children in the decision to spend time away from home, so that children have a sense of control.
- Tell children that homesickness is normal, but that they can use strategies like writing letters home, sharing their feelings with other people, and thinking about all the good things that camp or school is giving them, to help ease their worry.
- Arrange for a practice time away from home, such as a two- or three-day stay with relatives. If a child has reached high school without having gone to summer camp or more than a night away from home, this is especially important to prepare them for college or independent life.
- Practice writing letters, and supply pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes and paper before the child leaves home.
- Work with the child to learn about the camp, school, or hospital ahead of time, so they know what to anticipate.
- If possible, try to introduce them to other campers, counselors, or teachers ahead of time. A familiar face can make all the difference in the adjustment to a new environment.
- Encourage kids, even older teens heading off to college, to make friends with others and seek out trusted adults to connect to.
- Before the separation, don't make comments that express anxiety or ambivalence about the child going away. Even “I hope you'll be okay” or “what will I do without you” can leave a child worried that something bad might happen to them or their parents, and make them preoccupied with thoughts of home.
- Use a calendar to show exactly the amount of time a child will be away, if that's known. Predictability and perspective on the length of separation is important whenever possible.
- Don't make a “pick up plan” or a deal with a child to bring them home if they don't like the experience of being away. This undermines the child's sense that their parents have confidence in their ability to be on their own, and set an expectation that they won't like the new experience.

- Warn children against keeping feelings of homesickness to themselves, doing something “bad” in order to get sent home, or trying to escape.
- If your child takes medicine for attention, behavior or psychological conditions, don’t use camp as an excuse to take a “drug holiday.” Make sure that they, and the camp’s nurse or counselors, know their medication schedule and the importance of sticking to it.
- If your child has special medical needs, such as diabetes or asthma, make sure that the camp or school they’ll be going to has staff who know how to handle day-to-day care and emergencies. Parents who have managed their child’s care intensely can have an extra hard time giving up that control, and children can sense that anxiety.
- Above all, know whether your child is really ready for a separation. If you’re not sure, ask their doctor – but not while the child can hear the conversation.

All in all, summer camp and other separations from home can be great “life training” experiences for children, building their independence and teaching self-reliance and social skills that they’ll use throughout life, say Walton and Thurber, who met when they were boys at the YMCA’s Camp Belknap on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, and worked there together this past summer.

Ultimately, they say, parents and pediatricians must work together to help children prepare for and cope with separations, while camp directors, boarding school staff, hospital Child Life specialists, and others can help treat homesickness once it arises.

Resources for parents, physicians and camp/school/hospital staff:

Homesickness prevention information and *The Summer Camp Handbook*, by Christopher Thurber - www.campspirit.com

American Camp Association Online Resource for Families – www.campparents.org

American Camp Association accredited camp locator: find.acacamps.org

American Camp Association DVD/CD: *The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success*
<https://www.acabookstore.org/product.cfm?pid=1115>

American Academy of Pediatrics - www.aap.org

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