

Q: What should I do if I am afraid my camper might be homesick when she goes away to Tapawingo?

What is homesickness?

Homesickness is the sense of discomfort that occurs in a child for a variety of reasons and at a variety of ages. Typically homesickness is the discomfort that occurs in her first prolonged stay away from home.

Who gets homesick?

Any camper who is outside of her "comfort zone" for any reason whatsoever. Typically homesickness results from a camper who has never been away from the comfort of home for more than a day.

Why do campers get homesick?

When your child comes to camp, there will be many new things for her to enjoy and experience. For some campers, the "new-ness" of camp (the schedule, the food, the people, the bed, etc.) makes her want to have the comfort of what she knows (home). In some cases, simply the new experience of being away from home for more than a day makes her want to have the comfort of home. Either way, the camper who is homesick wants to reach for the person or thing that best comforts her at home, and it is not there. The unpleasant feeling that results from not being able to self-administer the comfort that the camper believes she needs is homesickness.

What does Tapawingo do about homesickness?

At Tapawingo, we believe homesickness is a real condition that should not be taken lightly. Even before the camper arrives we try to help parents prepare her with the following advice. We also train our staff on how to deal with homesickness if it should occur.

Saying Goodbye (a few helpful suggestions we've compiled from previous camper parents):

Telling you camper: "If you don't like it you can always call me and come home," is not recommended. Campers who struggle with leaving home repeat this sentence in their minds, making it difficult for them to make a healthy transition to the Tapawingo community. Your confidence now will make a difference in your camper's experience! Be assured – We have dealt with this before and if we think it is necessary, the Director or Assistant Director will contact you.

Should we send our camper if we know she will struggle with this?

We recommend camper parents evaluate and ask themselves the following questions before determining whether or not to sign their camper up for Tapawingo.

1. "Will we (the parents) be able to handle knowing our camper may be in discomfort and will not be able to be comforted by us?" Sometimes parents have a harder time

with the separation than their daughter does. Be sure you are ready to face this and are prepared to model a healthy attitude toward the separation for your camper. You need to be ready for this as much as she does!

2. "Do we (the parents) know enough about Tapawingo to entrust them with the comforting of our child?" If there are any doubts about this, we would ask that you not send your camper to us. Get to know us first through visits, our website, our staff manual, etc.

3. "Will our camper's negative reaction be so severe that the other girls in the cabin will suffer?" If so, you need to realize that you may need to pick up your camper before her week is out at your own expense. We do not refund money for any reason other than family emergencies. This is rare but does occasionally happen.

4. "What will our position be if our camper wants to come home? Will we make her stay and finish what she started? Will we be available to pick her up no matter what happens? Will we be able to be reached if we need to pick her up? Can we afford to pay for a week and then not have her stay the week?"

5. "Even with Tapawingo's excellent care and our excellent support, do we still have reason to believe that our camper will not be able to make the transition to the Tapawingo community?" If so, we highly recommend you NOT sign up your camper for Tapawingo. The reasons are threefold:

A. If your camper does not complete the amount of time she originally believed she would be able to complete away from home, she will be LESS confident of her ability to spend time away from home overnight the next time the opportunity or need presents itself. This can be harmful to your camper's growth and development.

B. Once you return home with your camper, it is possible she will be miserable for having left early and will spend the next several days wishing she had not left. She may even blame you (the parents) for bringing her back home. This situation results in a "lose-lose" for everyone involved.

C. We will not be able to refund your money for the week(s). Why? Because we feel confident if your camper is able to follow our guidance she will be able to overcome this obstacle. It is a good victory to have in her memory bank as she continues to grow up, mature and become independent (think leaving home for college).

Is there anything in your camper that would lead you to believe she would become defiant in terms of dealing with homesickness? As parents of a potentially homesick camper, you need to be certain that your camper will respond to the leadership of the camp staff in terms of how to combat her own homesickness. If she refuses to attempt to get over her homesickness because she is angry that you (the parents/guardians) forced her to come, and she wants to make everyone suffer through pouting, crying and being miserable, we will most likely need to send her home anyway (even if you

don't want her to come home). This is an even worse scenario than the ones mentioned above and should be avoided.

We sent our camper, now what does Tapawingo do when she is homesick?

1. Our program is designed with homesickness in mind. It is our overall goal to see campers bond with their fellow cabin-mates and their own counselors right away, thereby making a quick transition from "home" to "Tapawingo". Some ways we seek to do this are:

A. No gossip rule. Campers are not allowed to gossip about other campers at Tapawingo. This paired with the friendly, accepting environment centered on Christ usually results in campers enjoying themselves and making new friends.

B. Excellent staff. Our staff are trained to give comfort, love and support. They are wonderful women of God who are here to love campers with the love of Christ.

C. Active programming. Our Tapawingo program is active with little "down time" and our campers are well-supervised. We average a 1:4 ratio of staff to campers, and we keep track of where our campers are at all times. Our staff monitor conversations and keep things moving along to keep an eye on the well-being of each camper and camp as a whole.

D. The comfort of Christ. Most importantly, we offer the comfort of the Lord, our Great Comforter. Many campers come to know the Lord as their true comfort when they step outside their comfort zone and step into His ability to care for them. This can be a real faith builder for the camper, in addition to other campers around her!

2. In addition to the above, if a camper complains of being homesick, she will be given a speech similar to the one below.

"The feeling of being homesick is normal and something each of us must face at some point in our lives. It is a painful experience, but a necessary one. It's part of growing up from being a young girl to becoming a young woman. It will help a great deal if you can decide in your mind/heart to be here at Tapawingo, even though you don't feel like it right now. Once you "decide" to make the best of your time here and once you "decide" to stop thinking about the possibility of going home early, you will be so amazed at how you actually start having a better time! Do you think you could make that decision today and we'll talk again at lunch and see how you are feeling?"

The camper would then be encouraged to get the focus off of herself by participating in a few "self-less" activities like making cards for other campers and secretly delivering them, etc. Following is an excerpt from our staff manual on how our staff are trained to handle homesickness:

Homesickness

Being homesick is very natural and can be expected to occur. In some cases it is more severe than others and can create real anxiety.

A. When it seems to be a more serious problem, let the Director/Assistant Director know immediately. If camper is still crying and upset by Tuesday morning of her first session, let Director know immediately. (DON'T WAIT! We are depending on you to let us know!)

B. Never tell the camper that she can go home if she does not feel better. Leave that to us (Director/Assistant Director).

C. Involve the camper in an activity as soon as possible. Keep her busy. This takes work, but do work at it! (i.e. play games, tell stories, involve camper with other kids, get other kids to rally around her, get her to write home about the positive things about camp, etc.)

D. Allow them to see siblings and/or friends if possible to provide security. Never leave them alone.

E. If stomach problems occur, take them to the Health Director yourself.

F. Encourage cabin mates to pray for her, but be discerning in how much attention you give to the homesick camper. Too much attention may have the opposite effect.

G. Try to redirect her emotions - laughter is the best medicine.

H. Keep their attention focused on the next major event. Get them through one more meal, activity or night. A week away is easier for them to handle if broken down into smaller pieces.

I. As a staff, never say you are homesick or miss your boyfriend. Even though these comments are often done out of a heart trying to connect with the camper, they only make matters worse for her. She needs you to be glad and stable about being here. Save homesick talks for our all staff gatherings - we are the ones that want to hear about it!

J. Give her a special assignment: Making "Comfort Cards" for other homesick campers. This works! We have the materials for this project.

K. Be tender! Think about a time in your life when you were scared and things felt really out of control - and then try to be a COMFORT! It may be a true test of your patience when your camper comes crying to you at 2 a.m. every night - but lean on Christ for that extra ability to comfort her yet again! Please be sure to alert the Director if homesickness is continuing past the two-day mark.

L. Be WISE! Is the camper in her panic zone? Is it possible this camper will attempt a late night escape off the island? If you think this may EVER be a possibility, alert Director in order that camper may be assessed and appropriate measures taken to insure her safety.

M. Be loving!

3. If these techniques failed and counselors were out of ideas by Tuesday morning, they would alert the Director and/or her Assistant to determine what the next course of action will be. Usually at that point the Director would speak to the camper to determine whether or not she believed the camper could make a transition quickly. If she had doubts, she would contact the parents and determine a course of action with them.

This is a compilation of our experience over the years. If you have further questions, let us know!