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homesick help

Teach your kid how to conquer his sleep-away-camp blues with these coping strategies.

AS VANCOUVER MOM KIRSTEN MIHAILIDES WAS packing her six-year-old son, Teddy, for overnight camp, he suddenly came down with a tummy ache. "He didn't want to go," recalls Mihailides. "He kept asking if he would be able to call home."

To ease Teddy's first-time-camper fears, Mihailides talked about all the fun things he'd be doing—like paddling a canoe and trying archery—because she knew the experience would help build his confidence.

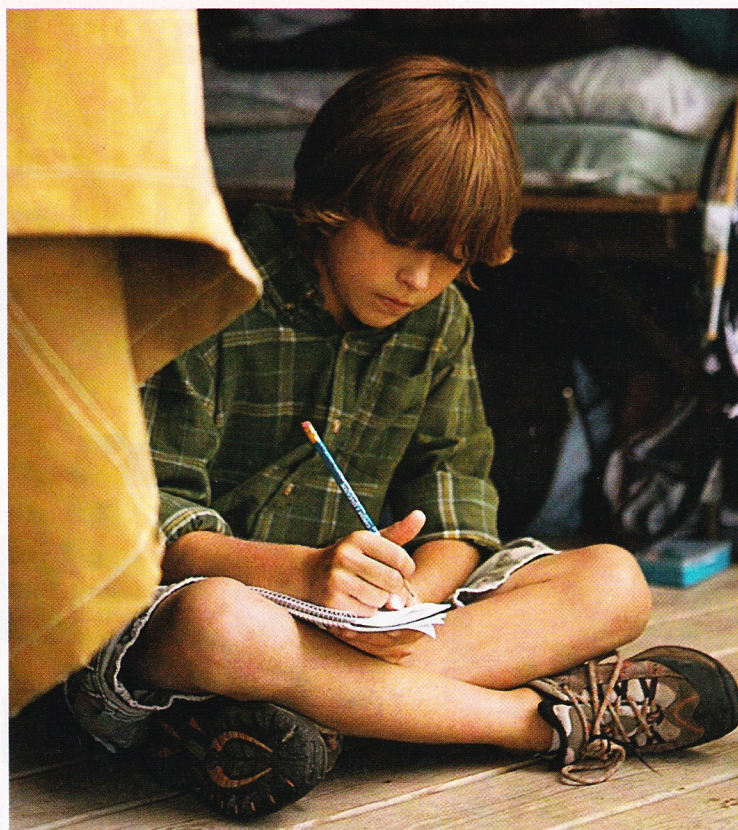
It worked. This summer, Teddy, now nine years old, is signed up for two weeks of sleepover camp, and he's totally excited.

Mihailides's upbeat approach is just what the experts recommend to get kids through the uncertainty of the camp experience. "Parents need to focus on the positive, even if they feel anxious about sending their child away," stresses Kristen Hyodo, summer camp and outdoor education director at Sasamat Outdoor Centre in Belcarra, BC. "Knowing Mom and Dad are on board with the trip is important for the child," she adds.

At Sasamat's overnight camp program, for kids ages eight to 15, Hyodo prefers not to use the term *homesick*. "When a child hears that word he might think there really is something wrong with him," she says. Instead, Hyodo tells her campers, "You're just missing home"—a feeling everyone deals with at some point.

Carla Fry, a psychologist who specializes in child and adolescent anxiety problems, says that unless a kid has a diagnosable condition, such as a panic disorder, being on her own can be a good way to develop important coping skills.

Your child needs stuff in her toolbox to deal with those feelings. Fry's advice? Accept that some hesitation from your kid is normal. Encourage her to find a friend or a counsellor to confide in should she start to feel uneasy. Then help set realistic goals: not to avoid worry altogether, but to find ways to deal with her emotions. Teach your child to reflect on how she coped during other tricky times and concentrate on the great parts about camp, says Fry. "They



can tell themselves, 'I really enjoy the breakfast here, and I really enjoy my bunkmate,' or 'I have so many cool stories to tell my family when I get back.'"

If and when a child does start feeling homesick, the staff is trained to watch for signs—those tummy aches, say—and will take an individualized approach. "Maybe the solution is writing a letter or email to family," she says.

The phone call home is a last resort. But if you get one, it's important to stay calm so you can reassure your child and de-escalate the situation. Fry recommends parents ask their upset child to go have a glass of water and take a 10-minute walk with a counsellor. Then, when she calls back, help devise a plan. "That way your kid is shifting from 'You've got to come and get me' to working on coping," she says.

Hyodo also recommends attending an open house with your child and, if the camp allows it, sleeping over for a family weekend on-site to build familiarity.

Whatever the strategy, avoid picking up your child early. "If we just save them they learn nothing except that they can't do it alone," says Fry.

For Mihailides, all the effort was worth it: "The skills Teddy has learned, he can't learn anywhere else," she says. Hyodo stresses those skills go far beyond swimming and boating, and will contribute to a child's emotional growth. And the best thing, she says? "Kids don't even realize they're learning as much as they are." —JANET SMITH

TABLET EXTRA

Check out our tablet edition for a roundup of hilarious letters kids have sent home from summer camp.

