

Dealing with homesickness

“From visiting camps the past 30 years, I would say that 90 percent of kids have some kinds of temporary apprehension about going away on their own,” said Dr. Bob Ditter, a senior-level clinical social worker from Boston, Mass, who specializes in the evaluation and treatment of children, adolescents and their families. “For most of them, it hits on the day they are leaving. But most get over it in a few hours.”

Ditter has worked with more than 400 summer camps across the United States and serves as a consultant to the American Camping Association, Girl Scouts of America and YMCA.

“Parents should have their own homesickness preparedness kit,” Ditter said. “First, in some way involve the child in packing. That way, they know that their favorite T-shirt or baseball cap has been packed. They don’t feel so totally disoriented when they get to camp—they know where things are.”

Sept 2 is for parents to do a reality check.

“One of the things that children are really good at is sensing parent sadness or anxiety,” Ditter reasoned. “They are like little Geiger counters, picking up on that anxiety and saying, ‘Wait a minute. If you’re nervous about me going, then maybe there’s something you’re not telling me.’”

The third step is early reinforcement

“Parents should talk to their children—not all at once but a little at a time,” Ditter said. “Pick your moments. Remind the child of why they got excited about going away to camp in the first place, whether it be riding horses or waterskiing.”

Once the children have arrived at camp, it’s in the hands of the counselors.

“They are the front line responders,” Ditter said. “Every counselor needs to have some idea of what to expect, how to take it in stride, certain strategies to use and knowing when it strikes—kids are often homesick early in the morning.”

How do you address them?

“It used to be a kind of hard-line belief on the part of camp professionals that you kept the kid at camp at all costs,” Ditter responded. “It was like breaking a horse—if you kept them there, they would get over it.

“I don’t think that is wise,” he continued. “I think there are children who really aren’t ready, and sometimes they don’t know it until they get to camp. If a child isn’t eating or sleeping and can’t be momentarily distracted in an activity period and it lasts for more than three days, you’ve got a child who’s just not ready.

“Rather than see that as a failure, which is damaging to the child, I think it’s better to say to them, ‘Look, you’re just not ready, and that’s Ok. So you’ll come back next year when you are.’”

Source: Church Mutual Insurance, Winter 2011