

HOMESICKNESS-PREVENTION STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS TO USE WITH CHILDREN AROUND PLANNED SEPARATIONS

1. Discuss the upcoming separation with your child. Young people should be told, “Almost everyone misses something about home when they are away. Homesickness is normal. And the good news is that there are lots of things you can think and do to help make things better if homesickness bothers you.”
2. Involve your child in the decision to spend time away from home. Prepare and pack as a family. Taking part in even the smallest decisions will increase perceptions of control. By contrast, feeling forced to leave home often increases the severity of homesickness.
3. Discuss coping strategies with your child. Using some of these strategies during practice time away from home will boost your child’s confidence about the separation.
 - a. Do something fun, like play with friends, to forget about homesick feelings.
 - b. Do something (write a letter, look at a family picture) to feel closer to home.
 - c. Go see someone who can talk with you to help you feel better.
 - d. Think about the good side of things (activities, friends) to feel better.
 - e. Think that time away is actually pretty short to make time go by faster.
 - f. Try not to think about home and loved ones to forget about homesickness.
 - g. Think about loved ones to figure out what they would say to help.
4. Arrange for practice time away from home, such as a weekend at a friend’s or relative’s house. Ideally, these 2 or 3 days do not include telephone calls but do include opportunities for writing a letter or postcard home. After the practice time away, discuss with your child how things went and which coping strategies worked best.
5. Practice correspondence. Ensuring that children know how to write traditional letters increases the likelihood that they will maintain some contact with home. Give children prestamped, preaddressed envelopes and notebook paper.
6. Work together with your child to learn about their new environment, be it a hospital, school, new neighborhood, or summer camp. The more young people know about the new place to which they are going, the more at home they will feel when they arrive. Web sites, orientation booklets, and current participants, alumni, or staff members are excellent resources.

7. Help your child get to know some of the people in the new environment. Having at least 1 familiar face—be it an adult or a peer—in a new place can diminish feelings of homesickness by increasing feelings of social support and connection.
8. Encourage your child to make new friends and seek the support of trusted adults. Both kinds of connections ease the transition to a new environment.
9. Avoid expressing anxious or ambivalent feelings about time away from home to your child. Instead, express enthusiasm and optimism about the fun your child is going to have in the new environment.
10. Use a wall calendar to show your child the time between today and the day of the separation. Highlight which days or weeks they will be away so that he or she can see that it is a discrete period, not an eternity. During the separation, a calendar might be a way for your child to keep perspective on the separation.
11. Do not make a “pick-up deal” with your son or daughter. Promising that “if you don’t like it, I’ll come pick you up” decreases your child’s likelihood of success in the new environment; this will give the impression to your child that you have so little confidence in his or her ability to cope with the separation that the only solution is to be rescued. Also, such deals create difficulties for staff members, who after enthusiastic support and coaching may be faced with a child who says, “My parents said that if I didn’t like it here, they would come to get me.” It also puts you in the position of either (1) fulfilling your promise to pick up your child, robbing him or her of a wonderful opportunity to grow and develop, or (2) reneging on your promise, causing an erosion of trust in your relationship with your child. Respond to the query, “What if I feel homesick?” with a statement such as, “You probably will feel a little homesick, but your practice time away has taught you what to think or do in case any homesickness bothers you. Plus, staff members will be there to talk with you and help you make it through. You’ll have a great time.”

Excerpted from:

Preventing and Treating Homesickness
Christopher A. Thurber, PhD, Edward Walton, MD and
the Council on School Health
PEDIATRICS Volume 119, Number 1, January 2007
Downloaded from www.pediatrics.org on January 16, 2008
by The Green River Preserve www.greenriverpreserve.org