

Homesickness In Children

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene Register-Guard, May 2009

We Americans are a restless lot. Pioneers and explorers to our genetic core, inertia is not encoded in our national DNA. We're always looking to get away, though from what we're not always sure.

Bored with what is here, and filled with curiosity for what is elsewhere, we take to ships each carrying the population of a small town and the bustle of a big city; to planes that squeeze us ever closer while feeding us ever less; and to our concrete-roving, gas-guzzling, climate-controlled homes and home theaters on wheels.

Upon our return we're no sooner unpacked than plotting our next escape.

As parents, we do this all in search of the Shangri-la of scrapbook memories, the Holy Grail of family vacation experiences, and the El Dorado of relaxation. We do this, we tell ourselves, so that our kids can see the country, or the world. That is, on the chance occasion when they look up from their portable DVD player, or their Nintendo DS.

We go mostly in summer, during the crazy lengthy educational vacation given our kids, a relic of days long past when schoolchildren were needed to help in the fields. These days the only plowing and harvesting that involves children during summer is of their minds by those tillers of profit on Madison Avenue.

Another summer is nearly upon us, and off we'll soon go again, many of us to the campground or to the coast, some of us to the airport or to the boat. Some children will be sent off to summer camp, for a week or even a month. And all children who journey will be at risk for homesickness.

Homesickness is the distress caused by a separation from home and attachment objects, such as parents or pets. Homesick children suffer acute longing and preoccupying thoughts of home. Away in an unfamiliar place, they miss their familiar surroundings and usual routines.

For some children, these feelings are mild, even brief. For others, day by day their homesickness worsens to the point of anxiety, or even a depressed mood with tearfulness, lethargy, and perhaps somatic complaints such as headache and stomachache. Enjoyment of travel is certainly diminished.

Other homesick children may instead manifest their homesickness as grumpiness, impatience, and perhaps a persistent anger, all of which can diminish the joy of travel for everyone else in the family.

Homesickness occurs to some degree in nearly everyone leaving familiar surroundings and entering a new environment. Those who suffer the worst homesickness are young people at summer camps, boarding-school students, and hospitalized children. As many

as one in ten such young people report intense homesickness with severe symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.

Many adults who as children went away to summer camp remember singing camp songs, shooting arrows and air rifles, canoeing and swimming, and performing in skits. What we probably forgotten however are the pangs of missing home.

For most of us, learning to be away from mom and dad in the end proved a good thing. We learned some basic survival skills, foremost the skill of surviving our parents' absence. More so than ever before, children need to learn such independence, from parents but most of all from their tethering technologies. They need to pull the plug, and learn that fun can be had with no sockets nearby.

To reduce the feelings of homesickness when at summer camp, or even when on family vacation, young people should be told, "Almost everyone misses something about home when they are away. Homesickness is normal. It means there are lots of things about home you love."

At camp, homesickness can be reduced also by having at least one familiar face – be it a camp counselor they met before hand, or a friend who goes to camp with them. Children should also be given materials –such as preaddressed, pre-stamped envelopes and notebook paper – to write letters to home.

During any travel, having comfort items – such as a favorite stuffed animal or blanket – and a picture of mom and dad and a favorite pet can ease anxiety. If there are favorite non-perishable foods, such as favorite snack bars or a favorite brand of bread and of peanut butter, bring or send these along, too. And don't forget to give the older child a new journal in which he or she can write down their feelings and observations.

Provide children with clear descriptions beforehand of the travel. Show them pictures of the destination, or the camp. Involve them in planning activities. Show them on a calendar the time between today and the day of travel or of separation. Highlight which days or weeks the child will be away, so that he or she can see that it is a discrete period, not an eternity.

Finally, under no circumstances of planned, recreational separations from home should parents ever make a "pick-up deal" with their son or daughter. Promising that "if you don't like it, I'll come pick you up" reduces the child's likelihood of success. The subtext of such deals is "I have so little confidence in your ability to cope with this normal response to separation that I believe the only solution is for me to rescue you."

Such deals also plant the seeds of homesickness by giving young people the expectation that they will not like the new place. Such deals also prevent the development of effective coping by pointing young people toward an escape route.

Enjoy the summer. Make certain to take or send the kids someplace without bandwidth at least once, someplace where they can learn the appropriate interactions of sticks, weenies, and flames. And where ever the kids go, make certain they go with the tools and support they need to deal with the expected feelings of homesickness.