



ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA
Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries
CAMPING MINISTRY

Preventing Homesickness

by Father Michael Nasser

Antiochian Village Camp Director 1997-2006

“I WANNA GO HOME!”

I can remember the feeling like it was yesterday—the dull pain coming from the hollow pit in my stomach, the overwhelming sense of fear, the terrible feeling that I was lost and alone. To top it off, I was horrified at the thought that I would feel like this for days on end. That is, of course, unless I could do the one thing that would make it all better—**go home**. When the homesick kids tell me, “You don’t understand!” they couldn’t be farther from the truth. When I was a camper at Camp St. Nicholas in California, my camp director had never seen a more homesick kid! Much later when I was 21 and coming to the Antiochian Village for the first time to be a counselor, my mother’s last words at the airport were “Are you sure you aren’t going to get homesick?”

As adults we often minimize the experience that young children go through when they are homesick. Even if we do begin to understand what a difficult thing it can be, we know that our children must at some point leave the home without being traumatized, so we figure they just have to get through it. While that is often the only way to handle it, it would be better if homesickness could be prevented all together, or at least minimized in its effect on our kids. Sound too good to be true? Maybe not.

Dr. Christopher Thurber at UCLA has done extensive research in the area of children’s experience of homesickness (you guessed it—he was a homesick camper too). He has come up with several suggestions for preventing homesickness before it appears.

GETTING READY FOR CAMP

We all know getting ready for camp means pulling out the sleeping bag and flashlight, but if you are sending a kid to camp for the first time, there’s lots of emotional prep work that needs to be done as well. Here are three “P’s” of Dr. Thurber’s tips:

- 1) **Practice:** Don’t let camp be the first time a child is away from home. That would be enough to handle alone, without the fact that it’s at least a week in an unknown place, often hundreds of miles from home. Weekends with grandparents or other family or friends are great “practice runs” even if your child

doesn't know it. They learn that they can leave home the world doesn't fall apart, and they eventually come home again having enjoyed great experiences.

- 2) **Preview:** Part of a child's preparation will be knowing what to expect at camp. Talks with other campers who have been to camp before, seeing their pictures, or showing them pictures of the camp from the camp website can all help them preview what they will experience.
- 3) **Prepare:** Promising your child you'll bring them home if they don't have a good time is the same as saying "If you want to come home, here's what to do: **don't have a good time.**" I've seen more than one homesick camper trying this as their best shot at getting home. Once a child knows they are at camp to stay, they will make the effort to have a good time, but not before. You can always change your mind later, but do your child the favor by not letting them in on the option of an early departure. All kids miss home when they are away (well, OK, maybe not the teens). That's normal. Tell your child that they may feel this way and that it's OK. Another big help is to let them know that you will be OK. Many kids' homesickness comes from worrying about how parents are doing at home. Some good intentioned parents tell their kids, "Mommy and Daddy are going to miss you SO MUCH." Instead of conveying love, it tells the kids you need them at home. Let them know that while you will miss them, you will be happy knowing they are having a great time.

WELL, WE TRIED

So, you did all that and still you have a hysterical child calling from the camp director's office? If we at the camp think that an early departure is wise, we will tell you. If we do have to call, it's probably a tactic being used in the camp's treatment of the homesickness. The best thing you can do is support the plan the counselors and director are working on, which will probably include: letting the camper talk about his or her feelings without dwelling too long on them, writing letters and, most importantly, keeping busy. Receiving letters from home will be comforting (you may have to send one before the child leaves to arrive early in the session). Phone calls usually make homesickness worse, so please refrain from calling the Camp except for an emergency. If some time passes and the child isn't able to deal better with the homesickness, the camp director may suggest an early departure. If that's the case, it will be helpful to reinforce the fact that the child tried in the first place, and leave a door open for next year.

With the right preparation and the right cooperation between parents and camp staff, your child can gain the invaluable experience of being OK away from home. While that is going on, parents can enjoy a guilt-free week or two of peace and quiet, knowing their child is taking some great big steps toward growing up.