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S'mores and More

Homesickness and Growth in Children

Parents should lead their children, not just respond to them.



23

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"Were you homesick at camp?"
"Yes, whenever I had the time!"

In a previous blog, I endorsed challenging children rather than over-protecting them. I argued that the parenting pendulum has swung too far toward protection and away from growth.

The article dealt in more generalities than specifics. This blog hopes to provide one specific example. Since I am a camp director, I will share a growth opportunity that I see each summer



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—overcoming homesickness and discovering independence.

I, like all camp directors, have spent a lot of time thinking about homesickness. I have come to think of it as more than just a challenge to campers, parents and camp staff. I now see it as an exceptional opportunity for growth. Let me share what I mean.

Homesickness is basically fear: fear of not fitting in, fear of change, fear of failure. In fact, most cases of homesickness seem to me to be associated with a child's fear that she/he does not "have what it takes" to survive without family: "I know I am OK at home, but I am not sure about camp." As a result of these self-doubts, the camper initially feels some insecurity. Although it is psychological, homesickness can have some real physical manifestations: ranging from a mild nervousness to appetite loss to stomach aches.

I can hear you saying: "Where is the opportunity for growth in that?"






Let's look again at the underlying anxiety: "I fear that I do not have what it takes to survive away from home, so I do not feel completely safe." At the root here is self-doubt. This is where the opportunity arises.

Camp addresses these very real concerns in some powerful and palpable ways. We provide an environment that is clearly safe, both physically and emotionally. We provide caring role models. We create a situation almost uniquely crafted to making new friends (as my mom once said, the one thing that every camper has in common is the desire to make new friends). We provide multiple opportunities to overcome challenges and develop skills.

We do all of this because the payoff is pretty big. Remember our hypothetical camper who doubted whether she could survive away from home? Once she not only survives, but thrives in the camp environment, what does she now believe about herself? She now thinks "Wow, I

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am more capable than I ever imagined! I still love home, but my fear that I could not survive outside of my mom's shadow is wrong. I am strong and resilient!" As you can imagine, this does a lot for self-confidence. In this way, homesickness is an opportunity to help a camper grow into a resilient and capable adult.

The challenge for parents greeting their returning children is to frame this triumph and focus them on the positive aspects of the experience. Often the parent might have received a homesick letter from the camper written in the early days of camp. The well-intentioned and loving parent might be tempted to dwell on these early days, asking questions about the letter (or letters) even though they just spent 4 hours hearing nothing but excited stories in the ride home from camp. This parent wants to "be there" for her child and provide evidence that they are emotionally available.

While I admire the intention, I believe the response missing a great parenting opportunity to provide emotional leadership.

Children leaving camp are still processing the experience. If a parent asks questions about the positive aspects, says that he is proud of the child and celebrates the victories, then the camper is likely to see the experience in a positive and favorable light. More importantly, the child will be more confident to embrace future challenges once they arise.

Contrast that with a parent that asks about the homesickness, shows the child the outdated letter and asks leading questions about how hard it must have been. This child is suddenly transported bad to that negative emotional state. The away-from-home experience is now associated with these struggles. This child will be less inclined to embrace future challenges.

In both cases, the parent's actions come from a place of love, but the first parent led the child toward a place of capability while the latter led to an inhibitory state.



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[Note: In this example, I am considering the highly common scenario at overnight camps lasting over a week in which a camper initially struggles with homesickness and then falls in love with the experience. I am not addressing the camper who struggles throughout the camp session. In my experience, this case is quite rare, applying to fewer than 2% of our campers. The case I describe is far more common, applying to over 75% of first-time campers.]

I marvel at how my own children can oscillate between strength and fragility. One day, they are ready for the next year of school and the next they struggle with insecurities. I believe it is our job as parents to help interpret their experiences in ways that will make them more resilient and capable.

Here is an example. Picture two mothers of 2 year-old girls at the playground. Both 2 year-olds fall and scrapes their knees identically. In the first case, the mom says "you're alright" and the child returns to play. In the second case, the mother gasps and rushes to the child frantically. Seeing mommy's concern shocks the child and tears flow readily. Both moms deeply influenced the way their children interpreted the falls.

When our children are older, we have fewer skinned knees at playgrounds, but we continue to have chances to lead our children and help them interpret their experiences. Camp is one such an example, but life is full of so many others (learning new sports, trying out for a play, making new friends).

Parents should help the parenting pendulum swing back to challenging their children. With loving leadership, they can help their offspring prepare for the variety of experiences, both welcome and unwelcome, that their lives will bring.

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Steve Baskin is the owner/director of Camp Champions and serves on the Executive Committee of the American Camp Association.

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