

Prepping your Son (and Yourself!) for Sleep-away Camp

by Francie Campbell, Parent Council

Congratulations on choosing Birch Rock for your child—you've found the perfect camp. We're a small, tight-knit community of staff and campers. We cherish our traditions, activities and rustic campus. We all live by our credo 'help the other fellow.' Every staff member is dedicated and well trained. Every boy is closely observed, and well known by the staff and by his fellow campers.

We recognize that sending your child away to camp for the first time is a giant step. Both you and your camper-to-be will undoubtedly feel excitement and some anxiousness.

Camping offers a child an exhilarating new life in the natural world. It propels a boy to discover his independence, and also his interdependency with others in this new community. One of the best things you can do to prepare your son for something this momentous is simple: talk with him. Bring up both the fun and the challenges ahead. Keep in mind it might be better to have several occasional, brief chats rather than one long conversation. Children often do better when important issues come up in general conversation in relaxed settings like in the car or at the kitchen table.

Topics that might help your child prepare emotionally for his big adventure include feeling homesick, making friends, cooperating, and asking for help.

Homesickness

Anxiety is a completely normal feeling for a child leaving for camp (or as you may have seen, starting to have sleepovers). This uneasiness is a mixture of excitement and a little fear of the unknown, and is usually mild. What can be done to ward off a strong case of homesickness later? Arrange practice time away from home. Weekends with grandparents, sleepovers at friends' houses and other extended time away from home help show a child he can cope with separation. This deepens his independence and helps him grow in confidence.

When your son first arrives at Birch Rock, he will almost certainly miss something about home. In fact, in study after study camp researchers found that 95% of children spending at least two weeks at overnight camp felt some degree of homesickness. These pangs reflect the fact that he loves his home, and that's a wonderful thing. Sometimes just understanding that concept can make a camper feel better.

BIRCH ROCK HAS A POLICY OF CALLING PARENTS ABOUT 4 OR 5 DAYS AFTER THE CAMPER HAS ARRIVED. ONE OF THE STAFF WILL TALK ABOUT HOW THE CAMPER IS ADJUSTING. PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN DO NOT TALK ON THE PHONE (EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF A FAMILY EMERGENCY) BECAUSE THIS CAN MAKE IT HARDER FOR CAMPERS TO COPE WITH HOMESICKNESS.

Homesickness is a challenge everyone can learn to deal with. So what steps can you take to make preparing for camp as positive as possible?

- Shop for gear and pack the trunk together. Involve your child to give him a strong sense of ownership.
- Share your confidence, not YOUR concerns. Talk with him about all the great things he can expect at Birch Rock, and share your anxiety only with another adult, such as Rich Deering or Mike Mattson.

- Avoid giving your son a mixed message like, "Have a blast at camp. I hope I remember to take care of your hamster." Giving your child something to fret about while he's away will increase homesickness.
- Do not make a pick-up deal. Telling your son that you'll come get him if he's homesick will undermine his confidence and coping abilities. Instead, say that his cabin counselor and all the counselors and kids will help him feel better, because that's what Birch Rock is about.
- Allow your child to talk freely about his worries. Answer the "what if" questions—"What if I get lonely? What if the counselors are really strict?"—in a coping-focused way. Try reassurances like, "You've made good friends at school and on teams already. I'm sure that Birch Rock will help you make friends with other campers." Or, "Most of the counselors were campers at Birch Rock, and they were chosen because they love the camp and enjoy teaching kids."
- Tell your camper that probably every camper has felt homesick at times, and it's completely normal. Look with him at our web site, and talk about our camp mottos, "shake a hand, make a friend" and "help the other fellow."

What advice can you give your child for coping with homesickness at camp? Brainstorm about strategies before he leaves; write a letter with encouragement for him to get the first day at camp (and give it to a staff member on opening day); and repeat your support in letters and emails.

Here are some tips to give your son:

- Focus on your activities. Getting into soccer or swimming or camp craft will make you feel better.
- Stay positive. Thinking about the cool stuff you can do at camp keeps the focus on fun, not on home.
- Talk to your counselor and your cabin mates. They know about homesickness, and can reassure you.
- Keep your confidence. Kids who stick with their anti-homesickness strategies for a few days almost always feel better.

Making Friends

Camp is about making new friends, and for many Birch Rockers, these friendships last a lifetime. When you talk with your child about making new friends, you might offer this advice: if you're feeling shy, then try getting to know others by being a good listener. Remember that not everybody in your cabin has to be your close friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's best friend. As long as you treat your fellow campers with respect, having one or two new friends at Birch Rock is great. If you have more, that's terrific.

Again, remind him of those camp mottos. Birch Rock is about fun, but most importantly, it's about helping boys build character and empathy.

Cooperating

Let your son know that he, like every other camper, will be part of a cabin. Explain that cooperating with others and helping out is what makes camp a bonding experience. Cabin mates help each other clean up for inspections, and everybody helps out when meals are served in the lodge. Counselors will teach rules and skills with patience. The whole camp, from the youngest to the oldest, pulls together as an amazing team.

Reassure him that he should give himself time to get the hang of it. Everything will be new—the kids, the routines, the bed, the bathroom, the activities. It always takes a few days to get adjusted, so patience is key. By the time he comes back home, he'll miss all those things that were strange to begin with! He might even talk right away about 'next summer at Birch Rock'...

Asking for Help

Everyone has good days and bad days (even adults, you might remind him). If something is bothering him, suggest that talking to his cabin counselor is a good place to start. Help your son understand that his counselor might not be able to guess if something is the matter, and that it's a good idea to speak up. It's the counselor's job to make things right, and he wants the boys in his cabin to have fun. Sometimes the counselor will ask the director or head counselor to help take care of the problem—it's their most important job.

Some Last Thoughts

Remind your young camper of his strong points. Talk about what he does well, but especially about what makes him a terrific person. Point out the things that make him a good friend, and help him recognize his fine qualities. This is an excellent way to support him emotionally as he journeys toward self-reliance.

Just as important, these conversations can help you cope with your feelings as your child grows up. A child's independence can leave his parents feeling both proud and wistful. The staff at Birch Rock understands all of these issues, and strives to partner with parents. Our goal, summer after summer, is to make campers and their parents feel more confident and fulfilled.