

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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SLEEPOVERS AND SLEEP-AWAY CAMP: HELPING CHILDREN WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

Why does my child become anxious about sleepovers or going to camp?

Anxiety is a normal feeling for children about to start sleepovers or leave for camp, whether it will be the first time or even if they have done these things several times before. This uneasiness or apprehension can occur for many reasons. For the majority of children, it is a mingling of excitement and a little fear of the unknown. These children usually are easily reassured and attend a sleepover or enter camp with minimal upset. For other children, the “fear factor” is larger than the excitement, and tends to take on a life of its own. In this situation, the child could be questioning everything about the upcoming separation experience: “What if I get sick?” “What if no one likes me?” “What if the (other parents) counselors are mean?” “What if something happens to you (Mom and Dad) while I’m gone?”

What does it feel like?

Some children experience physical symptoms when anxious including butterflies, cold or clammy hands, headaches, nausea, being hot or cold, or feeling faint. Others report feeling like they want to cry and hide. The thoughts that accompany anxiety tend to center around what can go wrong, which leads the child to worry more and potentially feel more physical symptoms.

What Can I Do As A Parent?

The Practical First Steps

- ❑ Allow your child to express his or her concerns, and answer the “What if” questions in a calm, coping-focused manner: “This is your friend who wants you to sleepover. You like each other.” “You’ve made friends at school, so I’m sure the camp will help with meeting friends while there.” “The counselors are chosen because of their good work with kids.” “The camp people work with hundreds of kids each year. They know exactly what to do and also how to get in touch with us if you need us.”
- ❑ Make sure your child is informed about the camp and its activities.
- ❑ Focus your child on the camp activities he or she enjoys, such as swimming or baseball.
- ❑ Attend any sessions with your child offered by the camp in your local area.
- ❑ Engage your child in the fun aspects of preparing for camp such as shopping for new clothes and picking out camp gear.
- ❑ Make appropriate communication easy on your child. Pack pre-addressed, stamped envelopes for your child to mail letters to you and others, such as grandparents and friends.
- ❑ Help your child rehearse. Children can practice being away from home by sleeping over at the homes of friends and relatives.

What Should I Avoid Doing?

- ❑ Avoid giving excessive reassurance, such as repeatedly saying, “You’ll be fine!” Too much reassurance causes anxious children to seek to discredit the parent’s opinion.
- ❑ Avoid telling your child exactly what to do. It is more useful to ask your child to come up with a realistic plan for how to meet new friends and find fun activities. Successful completion of the plan enhances the child’s feeling of control and accomplishment, and this will decrease anxiety.
- ❑ Don’t ignore the problem by hoping it will go away by itself.
- ❑ Don’t be impatient (“You’re going and that’s it!”).
- ❑ Don’t allow the child to avoid the situation (“Okay, you don’t have to go.”).

What Should I Do If My Child Is Homesick?

- ❑ Let the counselors know prior to the beginning of camp that your child is anxious about being away from home and may become homesick.
- ❑ Develop a plan detailing when your child can make phone calls home. In addition to regularly scheduled phone contact, calls can be earned by displaying positive coping skills as opposed to behavioral distress.
- ❑ Set an expectation for the phone calls, that they will be focused on the ways your child is trying to cope and have fun at camp, and not focused on crying and begging to come home.

When should I seek professional help?

Although it is normal to have some degree of camp anxiety, if the problem persists or the symptoms are interfering with school performance or friendships, help is available.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties and trauma and stress related symptoms.

If you or your child needs assistance, counseling professionals are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through LIFENET (1-800-543-3638). Help is available in several languages; Spanish: 1-877-298-3373, Chinese: 1-877-990-8585. For other languages, ask for a translator.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, AboutOurKids.org.



Changing the Face of Child Mental Health

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