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Clinging to home

Rumor had it one student at sixth-grade camp ate a whole bar of soap just so she could go home early. Fellow camper Megan DeHart, 11, said it was a lie, but already the entire sixth grade knew about the girl's homesickness.

"I know a couple of people that went home," Megan said. "And everyone's all like, 'Can you believe they went home?' ... I don't want people spreading rumors about me like that."

Megan has struggled with homesickness ever since her first two failed sleepover attempts when she was about 8 years old.

But she knew she wanted to make it through all five days of sixth grade camp, no matter what.

"The pressure is on because your classmates are there, and you don't want to be the one who goes home," said Megan's mom, Lisa DeHart.

Together with her parents, Lisa and Brad DeHart, Megan devised a plan to get over the homesick blues.

"Homesickness is very, very common," said Dr. Edward Walton, a University of Michigan physician who specializes in camp health issues. "Up to 95 percent of (campers) will feel a little homesick," he said, adding that one camper in every one-and-a-half cabins will have a really bad case.

Even severe cases of homesickness are preventable, though, according to a study published in the American Academy of Pediatrics January 2007 "Pediatrics" journal by Walton and counselor Christopher Thurber at Phillips Exeter Academy, a boarding school in New Hampshire.

"We're really hoping that through prevention and thinking about this, that this will be less of an issue," Walton said.

The report outlines ways parents, camp counselors and health care workers can help kids get ready for the universal milestone of leaving home.

Tip: Tell kids that everyone gets homesick to some degree, even adults.

Feeling sad about leaving just means that you love a lot of things about home. Megan's father takes an

overnight business trip about once a year, and even that is hard for him.

"I definitely miss home," Brad said. "I picked a job where I don't have to be on the road a lot."

Letting kids know that parents also feel homesick, but have learned how to handle it, can encourage children to do the same.

Tip: Arrange practice time away from home.

Megan called to come home halfway through her first two sleepovers.

Both times she had fun hanging out and watching movies, but when the time came to go to bed, she couldn't fall asleep.

"I ended up going home, and I regretted it," Megan said.

Her parents encouraged her to keep trying and not to let a third strike put her out of the game completely.

"I'd like for her to stick it out," Lisa said. "How many times are you going to your friend's house? They're going to quit inviting you."

Megan thought about how her friends must have felt.

"I've had friends leave from my house before, and I know how I feel," she said. "Like, 'Oh man, what was I doing wrong that made her want to go home.'"

On her third sleepover attempt, Megan kept those thoughts in mind and repeated the mantra that if she could make it through most of the night, she could make it through the whole night, which she did.

Tip: As much as possible, get kids involved in deciding when, where and how they plan time away from home.

Staying at a friend's house 20 minutes away is a lot different than staying at the grandparents' house four hours away.

But Megan agreed, upon her parents' suggestion, that a week at grandma's house in Indianapolis with her little sister, Rachel, would be a good next step.

"It was a little hard," Megan said. "I think I cried one night, but it was pretty close to the end."

They decided the next challenge would be a seven-day trip to church camp with one of Megan's best friends who had been there several times.

Tip: Learn everything you can about the new place before going.

"She had told me weeks before, 'This is what the bathrooms look like,'" Megan said. "She had pictures of everything."

Megan and her mom found detailed pictures of the bunk rooms, cabins and swimming hole on the Internet.

Tip: While away from home, do something to feel closer to home.

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Megan came up with her own way to remember her mom while at camp.

"It's sort of kiddish, but I bring my teddy bear everywhere," she said. "I spray my teddy bear with my mom's perfume so I can just, like, smell it."

The toy's fur is a little thin now, but Megan loves him anyway.

"He's not very big, but he's washable," Lisa said, laughing. "He goes everywhere."

Megan also took a picture of her family, which she looked at once in a while.

Tip: Don't call. Limit e-mails and instant messaging. Make sure kids know basic letter writing.

Calling from camp can backfire, the study warned, because it provides an immediate emotional response that can lead to worse feelings of longing.

Letter writing, and e-mailing if limited to once a day, can be a way for kids to work through their emotions. Megan wrote from church camp every couple of days.

"It felt good to get everything out," she said.

That's almost more important than the letter arriving on time.

"By the time it gets there, they don't even remember that they sent the letter," Walton said.

Tip: Parents should avoid sending mixed messages.

"We would try to write her every day, but I always would try to keep the subject light in the letters," Lisa said. "I would miss tucking her in at night, but you don't want to write that and say that because you know she's going to get sad knowing you're sad ... I'd say, 'Guess what the cat did today,' or something like that instead."

Parents mean well when they say "I hope the food's good," or "I don't know what I'll do without you." But Walton and Thurber don't recommend joking around about it.

"We're the type that would kid her," Brad said. "But I don't think I said anything like, 'Well, hopefully your room will still be here.'"

So long as the child knows it's a joke, Megan thought kidding would be ok.

"I know they're joking," she said. "I know he won't take out my room and stuff because that would be too much work."

Tip: Deal, or no deal?

The study firmly recommends that under no circumstances of planned, recreational separations – such as camp – should parents ever make a "pick-up deal."

It reinforces doubt that the child can make it through. It plants seeds of homesickness by assuming that the place is no good or the child will have a bad time. It paralyzes camp counselors and the like when the child is given an escape route. If the child asks to come home, the parent must either fulfill the wish and deprive the

child of a chance to be independent or break the promise.

But the DeHarts believe that in some circumstances, like sleepovers, a "pick-up deal" is safer.

Before Brad and Lisa had kids, their friends' child called one day to be picked up without explaining why.

"They went to pick him up and found out the kids had broken into the liquor cabinet and the kids were drinking," Lisa said. "Their son wanted to come home because he knew that wasn't allowed."

"We have that understanding that if Megan needs to come home, she can come home," Brad said. "I have to remind her not to make it a habit, not to do it every single time."

Tip: Do something fun. When you feel bad, find someone to talk to while away from home.

"The most important part is to make social connections and keep busy, and also expressing your feelings and talking about it." Walton said.

At church camp, Megan had a best friend to talk to. But at sixth-grade camp she didn't. It was a five-day long team-building camp. Students had to work with their pack, or homeroom, to get through physically challenging obstacles on high and low ropes courses.

"I'm not afraid of heights," Megan said. "I love adventure."

But camping without the support of close friends scared her.

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Ways to cope with homesickness

It's hard for everyone to be away from the things they love. Kids especially need a plan of action to deal with homesickness. Here are some good and bad ways to cope while away from home.

Good ways to deal with homesickness:

- * Do something fun.
- * Write a letter or look at family pictures from time to time.
- * Be optimistic about the activities and people around you.
- * Remember the time away is short, or at least not forever.
- * Recall things loved ones would say if they were there to cheer you up.

Bad ways to deal with homesickness:

- * Do nothing.
- * Wish you were at home.

- * Think all the time about home.
- * Do something angry, mean or aggressive to get sent home.
- * Run away.

Source: "Preventing and Treating Homesickness" by Christopher Thurber, PhD, and Edward Walton, MD, American Academy of Pediatrics' "Pediatrics," January 2007 issue.

Beating homesickness at the hospital

It's possible to prepare for a trip to camp or an overnight stay. But an unexpected stay at the hospital can evoke strong feelings of homesickness, which also can be prevented or alleviated.

A hospital stay is not a test of independence, so there are different ways to reduce homesickness there.

- * Reassure kids that missing home is normal.
- * Talk honestly about why they are being hospitalized. Don't run the risk of making them feel tricked into being there.
- * Take a tour and meet the doctors, nurses and other young patients of the hospital.
- * Help kids understand that the hospital is a place where people get well. Try not to convey doubts about the value of hospitalization.
- * An exact discharge date often is impossible to predict. Give a range of dates instead.
- * Use a calendar to explain length of time. Schedule visits and telephone calls using this.
- * Be with them as much as possible. If you can't be there, be sure to call.

Source: "Preventing and Treating Homesickness" by Christopher Thurber, PhD, and Edward Walton, MD, American Academy of Pediatrics' "Pediatrics," January 2007 issue.

Pam Haman, manager of the Gynecological Surgical Medical Pediatric Unit at Battle Creek Health System, offers advice for when young patients have to stay overnight or longer at BCHS:

- * Pastoral care is available for all patients to supply spiritual comfort or just another listening ear for the child or the family.
- * At least one parent or guardian is encouraged to stay overnight. The hospital provides chairs in each room that recline to a bed.
- * Parents can bring in something valued from home.
- * Activities are available, such as video games, books, board games, coloring books, videos and television.
- * The hospital provides social workers for more extensive psychiatric counseling, if needed.

Caption: Megan DeHart, 11, and her mother Lisa DeHart, discuss the growing pains of getting over

homesickness that Megan has gone through. Megan discussed several different methods that she has come up with to conquer homesickness.

Hannah Reel/The Enquirer

Rachel DeHart, 8, discusses what she goes through every time she spends the night away from home. Rachel said that she keeps herself busy playing games and watching movies to help keep her mind off of missing home.

Hannah Reel/The Enquirer

Megan DeHart, 11, holds Nathan, her teddy bear that goes with her every time she leaves home. Before going to camp for the first time, Megan sprayed her mothers perfume on Nathan to help her get through homesickness.

Hannah Reel/For The Enquirer

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