

Preparing Your Son for an Awesome Experience at Birch Rock Camp

First, congratulations on choosing Birch Rock for your child! You've selected the perfect camp with all the right stuff: a small and tight-knit community of staff and campers, old-fashioned traditions and activities, and a true ethos of 'help the other fellow.' Every staff member is dedicated and well-trained. Every child is closely observed, and well-known by the staff and by his fellow campers.

We're delighted to welcome your son for our 82nd season at Birch Rock. We also recognize that sending your child away to camp for the first time is a milestone, one that comes with excitement and some anxiousness for you and your camper-to-be.

Camp is about fun activities, but it's also about a child discovering his independence and how he fits into a new community. One of the most critical things you can do to prepare your child is to talk with him about both the fun and about the challenges ahead. [Keep in mind it might be better to have several occasional, brief talks rather than one long conversation. Children often do better with this sort of talk if it comes up in general conversation and if it's part of relaxed activity like riding in the car or sitting at the kitchen table.]

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

Homesickness

Anxiety is a completely normal feeling for a child about to leave 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 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 what he feels is a reflection of love can make a camper feel better.

Moreover, homesickness is a challenge everyone can learn to cope with. So what steps can you take to make preparing for camp as positive as possible?

- Shop for gear and pack the trunk together. Involving your child will 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 your spouse or Mike Mattson, the camp director.
- 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*. “You’ve made friends at school, and I’m sure that Birch Rock will help you make friends with other campers.” “Most of the counselors were campers at Birch Rock, and they were chosen because they love the camp and work well with kids.” Look at our web site or watch our DVD together, 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? Talk 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 reinforce the message in emails. Here are some tips to give your son:

- Focus on your activities. Getting into soccer or swimming or campcraft makes 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 all 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 fundamentally 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 everyone in your cabin has to be your best friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's best friend. As long as you treat everyone with respect, having one or two new friends at Birch Rock is fine. If you have more, that's terrific.

Remind him of the camp mottos. They are much more than just sayings at Birch Rock.

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 great experience. Cabin mates help each other clean up for cabin inspections, and everybody helps out when meals are served in the lodge. Once again, Birch Rock's theme is 'help the other fellow' and staff members help the young campers keep that in mind all the time.

Reassure him that he should give himself time. One thing about camp is that everything is new---the kids, the routines, the bunk, the bathroom, the activities. It takes a few days to get adjusted, so be patient. And 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!). If something is bothering him, talking to his cabin counselor is a good place to start. Help your son understand that his counselor might not be able to guess that something is the matter, and that it's a good idea to speak up if he feels upset. It's the counselor's job to make things right, and he wants the kids in his cabin to enjoy the camp. Sometimes the counselor will ask the director or the head counselor for help to take care of the problem. Helping kids is the number one job of the grown-ups at camp.

Finally, it's helpful to remind your young camper about his strong points. Talk about not just what he does well, but his positive qualities.

Discuss what makes him a good friend, and what his strengths are. Talking with your son about these issues is an excellent way to show support as he prepares to set out on this journey toward self-reliance and resilience. And just as importantly, these heart-to-heart discussions can help give you peace of mind as you ease your child out of the nest and into the broader world.