



Homesickness: advice for parents

Homesickness is a form of anxiety caused by being away from the routines and familiar environment of home and family. Most people suffer from homesickness at some point in their lives – at school, at university, even on business trips. The feelings of sadness and distress can vary in severity and may manifest themselves in different ways.

For most children, their first (and second and third and fourth..) visit to ECS - English Country Schools - will be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. They will improve their English, have fun, make new friends, develop new skills and increase their self-confidence.

Some children will however experience homesickness and this is normal. It's not easy to predict which children will suffer. In general younger children are more likely to be homesick and overcome it quickest. Older children are less likely to be homesick but sometimes find it harder to overcome it. You may be surprised to find that your child adjusts to life at ECS without a problem – or surprised to find that he or she does not.

A child who overcomes homesickness becomes stronger. For a very few children (about one in two hundred) there comes a point at which, having tried everything, it is best to remove the child from the school. This should be considered a last resort. Homesickness is not covered by our insurance so there will be no refund of fees. The child's personal happiness is of course more important than money and removal from the school if necessary should not be considered a failure. But remember that the child's long-term happiness is best served by learning to overcome problems and not giving in too easily.

We will do everything we can to help your child to settle in at the school, providing warm, friendly adult support and activities to help your child mix and make new friends. Shortly after arrival we will give all children a tour of the school to familiarize them with their new environment. We will make sure your child understands the timetable, routines and procedures. If your child is homesick we will provide appropriate support to help your child to overcome his or her problem.

Parents can help to alleviate homesickness as follows:

- Please do not tell children that they can come home if they don't like the school: this encourages a negative attitude and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- If your child is not accustomed to staying away from home, try to provide some opportunities to do so before the course, preferably for more than one night.
- Unfamiliar routines and environment are a primary cause of homesickness. Therefore, talk to your child before the course about the procedures and routines at the school. Refer to the Notes for Parents and Students and to the sample timetable

in our brochure.

- If you send children together, don't make a big thing about an older child being responsible for a younger one. We will provide support for every child. Allow your older child the freedom to have a good time and make his or her own friends without having to worry about a younger brother or sister.
- Talk to your child about how you all might feel when he or she is away – but be positive! Explain what homesickness might feel like – some children think it actually means being physically sick. Ask your child to tell an adult in the school (eg. a house parent) if they feel homesick and they will be able to help.
- When packing, provide your child with some photos of friends, family and pets so that he or she will still feel a connection with home. Allow your child to bring a soft toy (e.g. a teddy bear) if they wish.
- Bed times at ECS are: 7 – 11 year olds, 21:00hrs. 11 – 14 years, 22:00hrs. 14 – 17 years, 22:30hrs. Lying awake at night because bedtime is earlier may trigger feelings of homesickness. If possible, try to get your child into a new time routine in the days before coming to the school. Remember that children travelling from different time zones will take a few days for their body to adapt to the new eating and sleeping times.
- Don't think that staying near your child while he or she is at the school will help them. Once a decision is made to send your child to ECS, a 'clean break' from the family produces the best results. If you want to stay in the UK while your child is at the school take the opportunity to visit London, The Lakes, Cornwall or Scotland – anywhere that means your child knows you cannot visit the school on demand. If you want to visit the school during the course allow at least a week after your child arrives and don't be surprised if your child is upset when you leave.
- If your child brings a mobile phone, please make sure it will work in the UK. Mobile phones for 7 – 10 year olds are kept by the house parents and may be used daily 17:15 – 18:15 and all day on excursions. Pupils aged 11+ can keep their own phones at their own risk but must not use them (or any other electronic gadgets) during lessons or organized activities.
- You may think that your child needs to hear your voice daily. Our experience is that children fare best when they know you are there if needed but do not receive constant reminders of your absence. Be clear about when and how often you will contact your child: we recommend no more than two calls per week. Agreeing and keeping to these arrangements with your child will contribute to a feeling of control which will lessen the possibility of homesickness.
- Consider use texting or communication apps such as Whatsapp rather than voice calls as the main medium of communication. This keeps communications open (and avoids expensive international calls) without upsetting your child with the sound of your voice.

- Try not to treat your child too differently in the days before coming to the school: farewell parties and well-meaning visits from relatives might build anxiety in the child. Try to avoid things like, "We'll all miss you so much while you're gone. It won't be the same here without you." While this may be true, such talk might make the child feel guilty. Instead, try to talk about your child's trip in positive ways: "I'm sure you're going to have a great time. Take lots of photos and we'll want to hear all about it when you get back!"
- Try to have an alternative to "goodbye" when it is time to leave your child. A reference to the next time of contact is better: "Have fun and we'll see you soon." Depart swiftly when you have decided to go and put on a brave face. Some children are always tearful when it comes to saying goodbye but are fine when you have gone.
- Your child being away from you might be more upsetting for you than your child. So, having made the decision - and understanding the benefits of a complete and successful stay for your child - spend some time thinking about how **you** will cope. Perhaps take the opportunity to spend more time with another child who stays with you. Or, if you are left alone with your partner, rediscover what it was like to be child free! Accept that, for a few weeks, in the right place, your child can survive without you. He or she will be happy: make sure you are too!
- Organise friends and relatives to send emails, letters or postcards to your child. Don't send food. Posted items can take longer to arrive than you expect: it's best not to tell your child that you have sent something as this can cause anxiety if it is delayed. Just wait for it to arrive as a nice surprise.

If a child is homesick we will:

- Tell you about it and talk to you, your child, other pupils and staff to ensure that it is 'only' homesickness and there is no other problem.
- Inform all staff so that everyone is aware and will be sympathetic.
- Provide your child with friendly, professional support to help them to overcome their homesickness.

Initial homesickness usually stops – often almost miraculously – when a friend is made. It is important therefore to encourage your child to participate in the programme and take part in activities with the other children. If your child is homesick and calls you more often than you feel is good for them, remind them of your telephone agreement (see above) and arrange a time a few days forward for the next call. If this is difficult you can keep in contact with text messages between calls.

Don't believe the following:

"Everyone hates me"
 "I can't eat anything"
 "I lie awake all night"
 "I hate it here"

A homesick child will sometimes write or say almost anything to convince you of the need to leave. Instead, contact the school to find out how your child really is and believe what we tell you, even if this appears to contradict your child.

End phone calls positively, preferably with something other than “goodbye”. If your child is upset, tell us and encourage your child to go and find someone to talk to or involve herself in an activity.

If your child is homesick, remind yourself (and your child) of all the good reasons for attending English Country Schools. Remember that whatever you or your child might be feeling, your child is fundamentally safe: in a beautiful school in the English countryside, with caring, friendly people who only want your child to be happy and make a success of his or her stay. With your help we can achieve this.

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