



Life After BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL RIYADH

Homesickness: How to Help Your Child

While your child was counting down the days until she left for college, you were doing a countdown of your own, one tinged with sadness because your "baby" was leaving. On the fourth day of her independence, something strange happened. She called, crying, saying she was homesick and wanted to come home. You prepared yourself for hearing stories about her meeting all kinds of new people and even staying out much too late, but you never prepared yourself for this.

How Did This Happen?

Don't panic. Homesickness is a very common reaction for a first-year student to have. Keep in mind that even though your child was really excited to go away to college, she just moved away from everything comfortable and familiar. Freshmen are in a strange place where they may not know anyone. They are living with strangers, trying to find their classes, doing their own laundry, and eating food that isn't quite home cooking.

In addition, in high school, your child may have been a big fish. Now the pond is exponentially larger, and she probably feels very small. That is a lot of change to manage overnight, and your child is bound to feel overwhelmed and to miss her old life. However, you can rest assured that homesickness is almost always temporary.

What You Can Do

Now the 500 miles between you and your child feel more like 500,000. "What can I do? I'm so far away," you think. In fact, there's a lot you can do to help. Here are a few strategies to help your child adjust.

Validate your child's feelings: Tell your child that you understand and agree that it must be hard. While telling her not to worry because everything will be okay may be true in the end, it will help her more to know that you agree this is a big deal and that you understand it is really difficult.

Let your child vent: Your child is meeting new people and having many new experiences and may be overwhelmed. One of the most important steps to working through homesickness is talking about the feelings this difficult period brings. If you think your child needs to vent, ask questions to prompt her, but if she doesn't want to share, don't push it. This may only make her feel more overwhelmed. Just let your child know that you are available if she wants to talk.

Tell your child that homesickness is normal: Your child may think she's the only one feeling homesick. Let her know that she's not alone. Even the kids down the hall who are always laughing and who seem to be doing great probably have moments when they feel homesick.

Encourage your child to seek out campus resources: Suggest that your child talk to a resident advisor or a university counselor who is trained to talk about feelings of homesickness.

More Strategies to Relieve Homesickness

While homesickness often cures itself, you can suggest several other strategies to hasten the process.

Create a home away from home: While you aren't there physically, you, other family members, and friends should be there in photos decorating your child's dorm room.

Phone-home night: Set up a specific day and time each week to talk to your child. While your child knows that she can always call you in times of distress, it will help to know that she has a constant in her life that she can count on in this time of uncertainty and instability.

Communicate often and in different ways: In addition to phone-home night, make sure that you email and snail mail often. Everyone who's away at school loves to receive mail and small packages. Send clippings from your home newspaper, photos, and home-cooked desserts. Encourage your child to talk to her high school friends about how they are coping.

Encourage your child to make friends: Suggest that your child go to dinner at the cafeteria with a roommate or someone on her floor. Tell her to attend dorm activities and campus clubs. If she follows your suggestions, she is likely to meet people with similar interests. The more social opportunities your child seeks out, the better her chances of meeting people and feeling more comfortable in her new surroundings.

Adjusting to college life takes time. The best thing you can do is be supportive and tell your child that you miss her too. Before you know it, the homesickness will have dissipated to the point that she will be calling to say that she's not going to make it home after all, because he's doing something with friends at school. Then your challenge will be managing your disappointment, but that's a separate topic.