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, during the summer program the students had a very regimented day. Currently the students 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.

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, their ASP counselor or a university counselor who is trained to talk about feelings of homesickness.

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.