



Food Allergies and School: What Every Parent Should Know

By Deanna L. Katona for Bridges4Kids

As another school year begins, most parents are happy and relieved; but to some it is a time of worry, sleepless nights and loads of stress. Being the mother of a child with severe food allergies can be a nightmare for parents when enrolling their kids in school. When dealing with an allergic child at home, you are in charge, and you are responsible. When dealing with a school there is a whole network of people in contact with your child each and every day. You have to prepare to let someone else hold your child's safety in his or her hands. I can tell you from personal experience this is no easy task. Many times people that have never had to deal with the reality of severe allergies tend to think the parent is overreacting. They just do not understand the seriousness of the situation. However, there are some things you can do to put your mind at ease.

1. Do It Yourself: Awareness

Don't count on anyone else to do the research or teach those in contact with your child about your child's problems. Don't take anything for granted; do research yourself. Be very thorough and make sure all explanations are easy to understand that you pass onto others who will care for your child. There are many agencies that can be helpful getting information to you. Contact your child's doctor, they are great sources of information and literature you can copy and take to your child's school. Put together a folder with articles, symptoms, medication and how to administer, and include a letter from your child's doctor stating the child's allergies and what happens when he or she is exposed to that item.

If your child has a food allergy or any allergy that may induce anaphylaxis, be sure to provide instructions on how to give the epinephrine injection. Make sure that you properly fill out all forms needed for the administration of medicine. Be thorough when filling out all admission forms. Be sure to put all of your child's allergies in the proper places on the forms.

Don't count on anyone to remember which child you are referring to; schools are crowded these days. Put your child's picture on any necessary information. Have your child wear a Medalert bracelet or necklace, at least until all staff at school is familiar with him and know him by sight. I even went so far as to have a tee shirt made for my son to wear during the first few weeks of school. On the shirt was the writing "Please do not feed me eggs, I am very allergic to eggs." It had a big picture of an egg on the front with the red circle and line thru it. Now I know this is ok for a kindergarten child, but there are ways you can make your child known. Have them wear a small nametag with his name and egg allergy on it. You can make a small poster for the classroom that describes food allergies and your child's specific problems. Make it fun and include a picture of your child. This will also serve as a reminder for the class and teachers.

2. Information: Provide as much as you can

Be sure to provide all medication that may be needed in an emergency, it is always better to be prepared than to be sorry later. Any child with allergies that may cause anaphylaxis needs to have an Epi Pen handy. In my son's case, he has a severe allergy to eggs. We provided an injection for his classroom, also to be taken whenever he goes out of the school on a field trip, one for the office and one for the cafeteria.

Many people do not understand this drug.

The faster the child receives the injection, the less likely the reaction will become life threatening. The injection is only good for 10-12 minutes, which is why you have to call 911 immediately upon an anaphylaxis reaction. Be sure to train everyone that may use the Epi Pen of symptoms to be sure of before use, storage of the injector, and to call 911. Do not forget to request epinephrine be sent in the ambulance incase another injection is needed. The proper use of the epinephrine may be the thin line between a life or death reaction. State this to all concerned and put the emphasis on how serious this is.

3. Meet With Everyone Involved With Your Child

Before school starts for the year, set up a meeting with all involved with your child during his school day; the more people aware of the problem the better. Have a meeting with them all together and bring any medication, information and doctors letters. In our meetings we have included the kitchen staff, principal, teachers and bus drivers. Include therapists, nurses and aides if applicable to your situation.

If you feel you are not getting the cooperation you want, do not hesitate to go further. Trust your instincts. If you are not comfortable with the turn out, go to the Special Education Director or contact the Children's Allergy Network. The Children's Allergy Network can help you get results.

Severe food allergies are considered a disability, therefore if necessary request an IEP. Never let anyone downplay your child's problems. There have been many children that have had unnecessary complications and those who have even died because someone thought the parent was just being overprotective. Trust your gut. Protect your child.

4. The Cafeteria and Snack Time

Make absolutely sure that your child understands the consequences of eating the wrong food. Teach them to be alert as to what they are eating. Tell them it is never silly to ask questions. They can have an adult read the ingredients to them if they're too young to read. I always ask the cafeteria aide to read and then re-read if necessary the ingredients on any product. Become familiar with all variations of ingredient names.

Never guess. If no ingredient list is available, AVOID that product. If in doubt, don't let them eat it. Sometimes even after my child has the ingredients read to him, he still is uncomfortable about ingesting that item, I always tell him that if he isn't sure, do not eat it. Teach the child the proper substitutes that he/she can eat in place of an item. Read the menu with your child for that day; discuss the ingredients of each item, so that they will be prepared before lunch is served. Most schools provide 2 choices, talk with your child and pick the appropriate choice. Always be aware of what is being served that day. Be firm with the kitchen staff that if a meal substitution is necessary for any given day, you must be notified before your child eats lunch.

When it comes to the health and well being of your child, you can never be too safe or too careful. Be aware of the kindness of others. Children are taught to share practically from birth. One day someone is going to offer your child a treat or candy from his or her lunch. Teach your child the proper response. It is ok to say no, and you can do it without hurting someone's feelings. Peer pressure can be tough in the later grades. Teach your child it is ok to have allergies and that they are no different than anyone else.

Severe food allergies are disabilities. Any child with a disability needs to be reassured that they are important people and there is nothing wrong with the way they were born. If there are no ingredients listed on the food offered, be sure they know to say "no thanks".

Homemade snacks are big on this list. Most of the time they will have to be avoided. Make your child's lunch pleasing so they will want to eat their own food. This way they won't feel like they are missing something. My son has no problem now with saying "no thanks" because he always has good things to look forward to in his own lunchbox. You can put little notes and "smilies" in your child's lunch as gentle reminders and to reinforce their knowledge. When dealing with the life of your child, any precaution taken is a good one.

5. Check to make sure they're doing it RIGHT

Check back often to be sure all guidelines are being followed. Sometimes people can get lax with time. They figure that your child has gone this long without a reaction, so they will continue to do so. It is when the guard is let down that accidents can happen. Send in reminder notes, or updated doctor notes. Make sure that you keep track of the expiration dates on your medicine also. It doesn't do much good if there is a need for the injection and it is no good. When an epinephrine shot expires or is improperly stored it will lose its effectiveness. That is not a situation you want to be in when your child cannot breathe. Keep the communication lines open with all those involved with your child. This will help keep your child's allergy on the forefront and it will be less likely anyone will make a fatal mistake.

6. Your Support System: Family and Friends

It is sometimes a lifesaver to have a strong circle of family and friends. It is often as hard for the parents as it is for the child. I know there were many times I felt as if I were overwhelmed and had no where to turn. Surround yourself with people and information that will help you. There are networks and support groups out there; you just have to seek them out. Support groups are also a way to get fresh ideas, recipes and a shoulder to lean on.

Just remember ALL children are entitled to a free and appropriate education – that is safe. Do whatever you feel necessary to make it safe for your allergic child. Most schools will do whatever you ask *within reason* to put your mind at ease and to keep your child safe. Just do not be afraid to ask and keep the educators educated about the seriousness of allergies, and the consequences of not taking the proper precautions. If you do these things, your child will have a safe, happy, incident free learning experience this school year.

Resources on the Web:

Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network - <http://www.foodallergy.org/>

Anaphylaxis - <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~aaair/anaphylaxis.htm>

Allergy Support - http://www.allergysupport.org/index.php?contents=welcome.php&menu_topic=19

Living with Anaphylaxis & Handling the Stress - <http://www.calgaryallergy.ca/Articles/handlingstress.htm>

Bridges4Kids – <http://www.bridges4kids.org>

About the author: Deanna is the parent of three young children. Her oldest child, now 8, suffers from severe food allergies. Deanna has successfully worked with her school district in Howell, Michigan; together, for three years running, they have ensured an incident-free school year.