

Food Allergies & School

School Personnel & Parents: Understanding Different Perspectives



SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

Accommodation of students with food allergies at risk for life-threatening anaphylaxis requires planning, preparation, staff education and collaboration between school personnel, clinic teams and parents/guardians. School staff may feel fearful or worried about assuming this responsibility – especially if it is a new experience for them. School administrators are key to facilitating staff training and setting a positive supportive tone. Through teamwork the common goal of safe inclusion for students with food allergy can be achieved.

Potential Difficulties

- ❖ Few or no school nurses to coordinate plans, provide staff education and deliver healthcare services
- ❖ Lack of understanding within the school community regarding health condition
- ❖ Pressure or resistance from other parents regarding necessary medical accommodations
- ❖ Lack of time to develop plans
- ❖ Lack of resources for supervision
- ❖ Staff resistance to change (e.g. lesson plan modification)
- ❖ Unexpected visitors, presenters, assemblies/activities that bring food

Challenges Identified by Teachers

- ❖ Lacking sense of control over school environment
- ❖ Frustration regarding lack of desired outcomes by other parents
- ❖ Anxiety related to potential for anaphylaxis and need for daily vigilance
- ❖ Desire to have requested restrictive accommodations endorsed by student's clinic team
- ❖ Concern over inadequate, inaccurate and/or incomplete ingredient labels¹

School nurses and/or a district special education director can be of great assistance in guiding plans and smoothing transitions involving accommodation practices. It is rewarding to assist students to safely thrive at school.

PARENT PERSPECTIVE

A diagnosis of food allergy in a child presents challenges and lifestyle changes for parents/families. Daily management requiring strict avoidance of diagnosed food allergens and apprehension about the threat of anaphylaxis can be exhausting. Parents may have experienced the trauma of watching their child endure near fatal anaphylaxis. They also may be coping with a lack of awareness, knowledge and support from relatives, neighbors, friends and professionals.

Potential Impact on Daily Activities

- ❖ Meal preparation involving additional time, effort and cost
- ❖ Social activities involving food may have to be avoided or strictly modified
- ❖ Increased parental stress level
- ❖ Social exclusion and/or feelings of social isolation^{1,2}

Obstacles to Coping

- ❖ Lack of public understanding, resistance to cooperation, attitudes of disbelief
- ❖ Unwillingness to accommodate, frank hostility and increased risk for bullying
- ❖ Inconsistent medical information and faulty ingredient labeling practices
- ❖ Multiple diagnosed food allergies creates greater challenges²⁻⁴

Parents may view a school setting with trepidation due to increased risks for food allergen exposure and concerns about level of staff education on anaphylaxis prevention, recognition and management. Understanding the parent perspective may help school personnel develop effective approaches in assisting these families.

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References

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