

Back to School with Food Allergies

By Janice Miller

Having a child with food allergies is frightening enough when they are at home under our watchful eye; sending them off to school, whether for the first time in their life or just for the year, can be stressful. My 16 year old son has a peanut allergy diagnosed when he was just a baby. He will be a sophomore this year, and I still feel anxiety each year at this time. However, experience has taught me that there are things that a parent can do to make the school year safer and to lessen the anxiety for all concerned. Here are a few tips:

First, educate yourself; discuss the allergy with your child's doctor and make a plan of action in the event of exposure at school. Be sure to have any necessary medications and forms ready to go before the first day of school.

Call the school and arrange to speak with the school nurse, your child's teachers, the cafeteria personnel, and any other contacts, before the school year begins. With so much else going at the beginning of the school year, it's wise to have their undivided attention regarding your child's allergy. In my experience, the teachers and staff were always appreciative, attentive, and willing to accommodate his needs. It also helped them to put a face with the name.

In the earlier years of school, I would draft a letter to be sent home to the parents of my son's classmates informing them of the allergy in case there were shared snacks or holiday treats. I would also provide "safe", labeled snacks to have on hand and would take these items to the meeting.

Remember that you are your child's best advocate. In addition to educating the school's staff about the allergy, take time to educate yourself about their procedures and policies for dealing with food allergies in the classroom, the cafeteria, and on field trips. Some allergies are more serious than others and what they've experienced in the past may not fit your child's situation. Don't hesitate to ask questions and speak up. My son and I have changed several school policies over the years that continue to benefit those that came after him in his schools.

Finally, it is our job as parents to teach our children about their allergies in the early years, and as they grow and mature, to gradually turn over some of that responsibility to them. They will be out on their own before we know it and the more they know about their allergies, the better prepared they will be.

Here is a great resource for more information as well as helpful forms and materials:
www.foodallergy.org.