

Keys to Standing up to Food Allergy Bullying

Part 1 Involvement

INVOLVEMENT

In a study of children with food allergies and their parents, parents knew about bullying related to food allergies only half the time. When parents were aware of the bullying, the child's quality of life was reported to be much better than that of children whose parents were not involved.

If bullying has occurred in school, it's important to take appropriate action, including:

- Ask open-ended questions that require a response and can lead to further discussion.
- Request a meeting with the principal and/or assistant principal and teacher to talk about the incident to get a better understanding of what happened. Make the meeting request in writing (by e-mail) to document the date.
- Maintain a safe environment for your food-allergic child by not changing his or her schedule, which will provide comfort and familiarity. It is especially important for students to know which school staff are trained on food allergies and who to go to for help.
- Some bullying cases may meet the criteria for harassment or assault, which can result in legal consequences for the bully. In this case, immediate response is important. If threats of physical injury occurred (or injury itself), you may want to contact local police authorities.
- Age-appropriate disciplinary measures should be considered. Not all children who bully peers with food allergies realize it is dangerous. Age may be one factor. Education and awareness is important to create an inclusive environment to combat bullying.
- Speak with school counselors for help on educating teachers and students at the school about food allergies. This will provide a more inclusive climate for your child and other food-allergic students.
- Review the incident as part of an IHP/IHCP, 504 Plan and/or IEP meeting with school administrators. It may be appropriate to include accommodations to address your food-allergic child's individual needs further.

Protection Under the Americans with Disabilities Act

Food allergy anaphylaxis is a health impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as breathing and eating, under the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act (ADAAA). Therefore, students with food allergies are considered disabled under these terms. Students with food allergies are offered equal access to programs and activities provided by facilities that receive federal financial assistance, such as public schools, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 is a non-discriminatory regulation for students with disabilities. Parents may refer their child for a Section 504 evaluation in order for their child to be found eligible to receive appropriate accommodations. The U.S. Department of Education states that schools have an obligation to ensure a student with disabilities who is bullied continues to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as outlined in his or her individualized education program (IEP). The Department of Education encourages using IEPs and 504 plans to outline approaches for preventing and responding to bullying as well as provide additional support to students with disabilities.

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Part 2 Inclusion

INCLUSION

Schools play an important role in a food-allergic student's educational life – not just academically or in the health needs of the student but in ensuring that the food-allergic student is included in programs and activities provided by the school. Through increased inclusion, the risk of bullying incidents can be lowered.

Parents:

Providing staff with inclusive practices for an improved school culture can reduce bullying incidents. The following list may help provide guidance for inclusion:

- If your child has an IEP or 504 Plan, request an IEP or 504 meeting and review the incident. It may be appropriate to include accommodations to address your child's individual needs further (see [Dear Colleague Letter](#)). This is especially important for reentry into school after an incident has resulted in a reaction. Accommodations to address reentry should be detailed.
- Maintain your child's regular schedule to provide comfort and familiarity. This is especially important due to the student having knowledge of trained staff and knowing who to go to for help.
- Speak with the school counselor about ways to educate your child's classmates, when appropriate, about food allergies.
- Parents should, if possible, be present at their child's school. Research shows that 67% of bullying happens when adults are not present. Help schools that may not have resources available to keep an eye on every student. When parents help staff with some of the workload, it may free staff to be able to pinpoint bullying behaviors.
- Sign children up for sports and other special interest activities such as martial arts or music lessons. Then invite friends from the activity to your home or to other events.
- Invite classmates to your home to show them how similarly everyone really lives.

Staff:

- Provide a safe environment by reducing the risk of exposure to the allergen in the classroom, whether that's providing an allergen-free or food-free classroom according to the food-allergic student's IHCP/Section 504 plan.
- Refrain from exposing the student's medical privacy or labeling the student ("allergy kid" or "peanut boy/girl" or asking in front of all students, "Who here has the food allergy?").
- Refrain from segregating students with food allergies to a separate area during activities. For example, having a student sit outside in the hallway or send the student to the library while performing an activity in the classroom "for the student's safety." A more acceptable way of safely performing the activity to include the student is to adhere to the student's IHCP/Section 504 plan and/or refrain from using the student's allergen in the classroom. Inclusion of students is important for all students to reduce bullying incidents.
- Participate in food allergy awareness campaigns. For example, Food Allergy Awareness Week.
- Improve the school culture and climate for both staff and students.
- Provide a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports program or similar program to promote and focus on positive behaviors.