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Two parents relate their experiences

Navigating Food Allergy Plans at School

By Ruth Lovett Smith

I thought I had this food allergy thing down. It had been three years since my son's diagnosis and I was used to carrying two EpiPens®, Benadryl®, hand wipes, a variety of "safe" snacks, and more. We were vigilant about everything from reading labels, to ordering food in a restaurant, to only eating food from home at play dates and birthday parties. Then came Kindergarten.

I never once worried about my son going to school. I hadn't thought about the fact that I would no longer be with him to help him make safe choices. Then the day came and I realized I was expected to trust numerous strangers to take care of him and keep him safe.

I left EpiPens® at the school, gave the nurse the forms signed by our allergist, signed a form the nurse gave me, and dropped my son off, assuming he was in good hands. I didn't ask if the school had a policy for managing life threatening food allergies. I didn't think I had to, considering that food allergies were on the rise and the Massachusetts Department of Education had published guidelines several years prior encouraging schools to implement food allergy policies and protocols.

I quickly learned that there wasn't a written food allergy policy at our school and that there seemed to be a lack of information and education amongst the staff. Within the first few months of Kindergarten my son found

himself eating alone at the "allergy aware table" at lunch. On a holiday he was given a cookie and was told it was safe by a teacher, after which he developed an itchy tongue. He often felt left out of classroom birthday celebrations when cupcakes were brought in.

I brought my concerns to the attention of the school principal who unfortunately was less than sympathetic. It didn't seem right to me that my son could be left out or pushed aside due to his food allergies. Weren't all children supposed to be treated equally? It was then that I realized I needed to educate myself more to keep my son not only safe but fully included in school.

Through research I quickly learned that many children have some form of a care plan in school. I consulted with the school nurse and realized that the form I brought in from my allergist was a Food Allergy Action Plan and that the form I signed that was provided by the nurse was an Individual Health Care Plan. The Food Allergy Action Plan was on the top and the Individual Health Care Plan was on the back. It was blank with the exception of headings like Bus, Classroom, and Field Trips.

This started a yearlong process of trying to get accommodations to fill in the information under those headings. Since I met with some resistance I pursued a 504 plan, which carries

more legal weight than an Individual Health Care Plan. I think the fact that my son already had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a social delay put us in a better position.

A group consisting of members of the special education team, school nurse, principal, classroom teacher and my husband and I sat down multiple times to draft an Individual Health Care Plan. It addressed numerous concerns such as classroom accommodations, where my son would sit at lunch, field trips and other issues. This IHCP would be attached to his current IEP.

I also addressed the school committee and superintendent of schools about our concerns and what I had learned. Eventually a written food allergy policy and series of protocols was put into place.

Not all food allergies or food allergic children are created equal; therefore, not all school plans will be the same. However all children with life-threatening food allergies should have some type of plan. A written plan keeps parents and all school staff on the same page regarding recognizing allergic reactions, treatments and accommodations in school.

Which Plan is Right for You? (see next page)

Ruth Lovett Smith is a volunteer support group leader of AAFA New England's Nashoba Valley Allergy and Asthma Educational Support Group, and is the founder of Best Allergy Sites, an on-line food allergy directory and resource guide.



Please share YOUR story. How have you handled "real-life" challenges of living with allergies or asthma? Let us know what happened and how everything worked out. (Send to: sharons@aafane.org, or call 781-444-7778.)

Food Allergy Plans at School (Continued)

These are the types of documents that you may need to create together with your child's doctor and school nurse.

Emergency Care Plan or Food Allergy Action Plan

This is a written plan based on information from your allergist. It should list the patient's allergies – which ones are life threatening, what the symptoms of an allergic reaction are, and what medications the patient should receive, how much, and when.

Individualized Health Care Plan (IHCP)

An IHCP is a written plan that many food allergic children have in school. It usually includes the Emergency Care Plan but also goes a step further to include other accommodations in school. This plan should be developed with the help of the school nurse and can also include input from the classroom teacher and school principal. Many accommodations can be listed in an IHCP and it is up to the school, parents, and child's needs as to what is appropriate.

Section 504 Plan

Section 504 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. It applies to

all institutions, including public schools, which receive financial assistance from the federal government. The U.S. Department of Education Section 504 regulation defines an "individual with handicaps" as "any person who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment." Individuals with life threatening food allergies often qualify for a 504 plan as the major life activity that is limited is breathing. All school districts should have a section 504 coordinator. This is the person to contact to start the process of determining eligibility. A 504 plan can be written in a similar fashion to an IHCP.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

An IEP falls under the federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). To qualify for an IEP the disability must affect learning. There are currently fourteen specific disabilities covered under the IDEA; life-threatening food allergies and asthma are typically covered under a category called "other health impairment" (OHI). All school districts should have a process for requesting an IEP evaluation. Contact your school or special education director.

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