

Parents Should Work with Child's School to Prevent Allergen Exposure

Health Journal Assistant Editor Brenda Welch shares some parental strategies she learned while writing this month's Local Beat story, which begins on page six.

WRITTEN BY BRENDA H. WELCH

I love food.

More specifically, I love food that packs a carbohydrate-fueled, tasty punch and heeds the will of my lazy, impatient side. I find cooking neither relaxing nor enjoyable, and the last thing I want to do after slicing, dicing, and deciphering cooking terms is attempt to chisel the inch-thick burned residue off the bottom of a pot that I left on the burner for too long.

Thankfully, the culinary gods were looking out for me when I married my husband, Bob. His cooking intuition is truly divine, and it is awe-inspiring to watch him throw together a delicious, well-balanced meal with little more than flour, eggs and chicken broth. He has proven he has no need for measuring cups or my handy chisel.

When our son Sam was born three years ago, I didn't just give birth to a seven-pound, eight-ounce miracle—I gave birth to a whole new lifestyle. At 32, I had to shift my focus from my career as a writer to my new role as a stay-at-home mother and all-around domestic goddess. While in some areas I held my own—I produced enough milk to feed a small nation and managed to keep my sanity dealing with a colicky baby—in the kitchen I continued to be a dismal failure. The mere task of putting dinner on the table each night for Bob and me had been challenging enough, but the thought of having to provide a nutritious meal three times a day (and snacks!) for Sam until he flew the coop sent my fight-or-flight response into overdrive. Thankfully, Bob respects my limitations and frustrations and made a good call in purchasing a George Foreman Grill and a quick-and-easy rice cooker. I can handle that...barely.

In writing this month's Local Beat story, I got to thinking about the moth-

ers and fathers who share my cooking issues but have the added challenge of preparing meals for a child with food allergies—a task in which the slightest mistake in purchasing and preparing food could have devastating consequences.

Who's responsible?

Fortunately, parents have control over what comes in and out of their kitchens. However, when children eventually go to school, the odds of meeting an offending allergen face-to-face are multiplied. What expectations should a parent of children with food allergies have in a school? What information should teachers know to protect their students? Do schools accept the liability of a child with a life-threatening medical condition? And finally, how in the world do parents establish the sort of trust needed to confidently send their child to school?

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— Betty Casey, preschool director, Ghent United Methodist Church

For answers, I contacted Betty Casey, director of the Ghent United Methodist Church's preschool, where Lucy and Paul Gibney's son, Colin, is a student (the Gibneys are featured in this month's Local Beat story). Out of the 70 children enrolled at the school this year, seven have food allergies, compared to only one last year. "I don't think anyone knows for sure why there has been such an increase," Casey says. "We have had many parents visit our school recently, and when asked if their children have any allergies, I am



amazed at how many say 'yes'."

Casey says parents hold the responsibility for providing an alternative meal or snack during times of social eating so that their child does not feel left out, but the school does send home a list of "safe" treats that would be appropriate for all children. For instance, because of Colin's allergies to many foods, Lucy Gibney's baking business provides all the treats for the kids in Colin's classroom, such as daily snacks and birthday party cupcakes. She also approves any cooking that might be done in the classroom. Casey says school staff members disinfect the tables after each meal or snack time as well as any item that a child with food allergies may touch throughout the day.

What can parents do?

Says Casey: "In our school, the children bring their own lunches, and if the allergic child stays for lunch they are seated at a 'special' table. We are assiduous in reading labels. We have had to change our play dough recipes and have also researched the ingredients of the paint and glue used in the classroom. Allergies have our foremost attention."

Casey advises parents to understand school procedures for administering aid to a child experiencing an allergic reaction; she says parents should ask if staff are trained and willing to accept

that responsibility. Other questions to ask include: Has at least one staff member who is in the building during school hours undergone the eight-hour MAT (medication administration training)* course? Does the school have an allergy action plan? Does everyone working with this child (i.e., music teachers, physical education teachers) know the plan? Who will be administering the medication? Where is the medication stored? Parents should also keep their contact information current and make sure that their child's medication is up to date. Any action plans should be reviewed and signed by the child's pediatrician or allergist.

Casey emphasizes that the children with food allergies who attend her school don't feel out of place and are not ridiculed by the other children. "We find that it has been a wonderful learning experience for everyone," she says. "This is another part of life that we need to learn about, whether we happen to be the one with allergies or not. Just think, the children watch the teachers reading food labels! What a wonderful model for young children." ■

*MAT (medication administration training) is a competency-based course approved by the state Board of Nursing and Department of Social Services to train providers who work in child day programs to safely administer medication to children. Staff members who work in licensed or regulated child day programs and who give prescription drugs to children are required by the Code of Virginia to satisfactorily complete the MAT training course.