

# **Anaphylaxis and Schoolyard Violence**

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Recently, disturbing reports have been received at AAIA of children with life-threatening food allergies being terrorized by "bullies". The latter threaten to harm them with that most feared of weapons – the allergenic food. Parents have asked how they can deal with such situations.

There are several important elements to be considered. One is the larger social problem of schoolyard and neighbourhood bullies in general; a second is the issue of whether/how the problem is different for an allergic child than for any other child; the third is how to respond constructively.

## **Bullying**

There is evidence that the problem of bullying -- that is, of children victimizing other children -- is a widespread and serious one in many Western countries. Many explanations have been proffered and each of us may have our own personal theory about what contributes to children acting aggressively towards others less powerful than themselves. What we do know, however, is that by definition, the victimized child is likely to be a less powerful child than others or in some way marginalized. In other words, something about the "victim" has been perceived as making him or her a good "target", i.e., he seems easy to push around. This statement is in no way meant to suggest that the child deserves to be mistreated or that (s)he brought it on him or herself. It suggests, rather, that if a child is less powerful in some way, such as being small, fearful, known to avoid fighting, or lacking in social support for some reason, etc., (s)he may be particularly vulnerable to someone who seeks to dominate others.

## **Particular danger for allergic children**

It is painful, indeed, to think of a child who has been carefully trained to live cautiously and responsibly for his/her own protection at the mercy of someone who abuses the potential threat of an allergenic food or other substance. In an anaphylactic child, the anxiety aroused by this danger suddenly beyond his/her own control must be very intense. This kind of situation is quite different in a couple of important ways from more usual bullying situations. Unlike a knife or other common weapon, the danger inherent in the allergenic substance is unlikely to be fully comprehended by the bully, who knows it strikes fear into the victim's heart, but does not really grasp that this "weapon" could, in fact, kill.

Other weapons, after all, are dangerous to everyone and we all fear them, including the bully. The concern is that it could conceivably be much easier for the bully to actually follow through with his/her threats when the consequences are not understood, the dangerous substance is not frightening to look at and inflicts no visible damage, nor is it even forbidden to carry in the schoolyard.

## **What to do**

Bullying is an exercise in power. Help to "empower" your child, who has been made to feel helpless and without recourse. Here are several suggestions of steps you might take to try to alleviate the situation and protect your child.

- 1) If the bully is a student at your child's school, approach school officials and enlist their aid in dealing with the situation. It is important that school personnel understand that this situation is more than just anxiety-producing for your child. They will need your help to understand that the situation actually could, even inadvertently, become a matter of life and death. (Ask your local AAIA Activator or your physician to help get your point across, if needed). You might find it helpful to discuss the matter with your local police department. Often there is a special officer or department which deals with youngsters, and they usually see preventive intervention as quite appropriate. Police often prefer to "set kids straight" in an informal, non-threatening way before a problem is full-blown rather than sit back until you have an actual offense to report. Everyone (the bully included) must be helped to understand that this represents a potential crime and a serious potential threat to your child's safety, not the complaint of overprotective parents or a wimpy kid.
- 2) Develop an avoidance plan with your child. You have previously worked together on ways of avoiding the allergenic substance; now you must work on a plan for avoiding the bully. This may mean a new route home from school, a "buddy" system in the schoolyard (preferably with the school's support), an older neighbour or friend to walk home with, etc. You might wish to equip your child with one of those extremely shrill sportsman's whistles that are now sold for the use of safety conscious urbanites. Be creative! In addition, if you can help your child identify anything else that "signals" to the bully that (s)he is a vulnerable person (as described above), there may be something that can be done to alter that presentation of self. The child's teacher or school counselor may be helpful in this regard.
- 3) Consider approaching the bully's parents and enlisting their help. You would be wise to use a non-confrontational approach, and emphasize that you are certain they would not wish to see their child seriously harm another. You will need to educate them about the dangers involved and try to get them to help their child see how dangerous the situation could become. The support of the school or a youth officer would be especially helpful in getting the family's attention if they are not likely to be immediately responsive.
- 4) Enroll your child in a self-defense course geared to children. The skills learned have obvious practical utility. Equally important, however, the fact that knowing (s)he can protect him/herself reduces the fear of an attack and increases self-esteem. Since a child's self-esteem is as much at stake here as his/her physical safety this aspect of helping should not be underestimated.

- 5) Help your child to understand that the bullying is an expression of the bully's problem, not your child's. Young children have a tendency to internalize mistreatment; that is, to feel that they have caused or deserved it in some way.
- 6) Develop a contingency plan. If all else fails and your child is attacked with the allergenic food, (s)he must know exactly what to do. Perhaps the EpiPen needs to be carried at recess or whenever the bully is likely to be around. Again, a whistle may be helpful, to draw the attention of others for help. Just as you would prepare for the eventuality of an allergic reaction anywhere else, -- or, for that matter, an escape plan for a fire, "street-proofing", etc. -- you must prepare for this potential emergency. Your child will feel more secure if it is absolutely clear what should be done and if medication is immediately available.
- 7) As a worried parent, you will benefit from the support of others. Discuss the problem with people in your community, who may have a helpful perspective or useful suggestions. If others find it difficult to appreciate the danger which concerns you, talk to fellow AAIA members.

Genuine understanding, emotional support and helpful information are invaluable during stressful times.

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