



Food Allergies and the Preteen Years: Staying Alive

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The pre-teen years are transition years for children with severe food allergies. These are the years when Mom and Dad slowly relinquish their roles as mediators between their child and the world. The goal: to give their child the vital opportunities to master the survival skills that will keep him or her safe while away from home.

In my own case, my daughter has watched me safety-proof her world for nearly twelve years. I do not wish to downplay her role in protecting herself. Nonetheless, like every parent, I've been the one who has phoned companies to ascertain ingredients, phoned other parents about birthday party menus, shopped for groceries, etc. Now, as my daughter approaches her twelfth birthday, it is time for her to put years of observation to use and begin doing these things for herself. If not now, when?

The help of other parents will smooth her transition to independence. For example, let's assume it is your child's birthday party and one of the guests has a serious food allergy. Let's assume this is a child you've known for years. How does it feel when that child asks you if she may read the labels of the food you have prepared? Hard not to feel that this child doesn't trust you, right? Wrong. Remember that this is not a trust issue. Remember that this child has learned that she will stay alive if the rules are obeyed, everywhere, every time.

Every parent of an allergic child will tell you the near-horror stories of the time they or another family member nearly made a bad call, an oversight or a really bad mistake. Since labels can change when production lines change, what was safe in October might not be safe in April. My daughter knows that I love her beyond measure. She also knows that I make mistakes. Who would think an ice pop has a "may contain peanuts/nuts" warning. If my daughter hadn't asked me to read the label, I wouldn't have known. Hence the "everywhere; every time" rule.

Back to the birthday party scenario. No matter how careful you think you are, and how sincere your assurances are, you have to remember that your house does not work the way my daughter's house does. Because of the issue of cross-contamination (the knife that cut the tuna sandwich also cut the peanut butter one), the food-allergic cannot be sure of anything. In my daughter's house there is no nut, peanut or peanut/nut by-product to be found anywhere. That's why our houses are different and my child knows it. Hence the rule.

So, how can you help? Easy. When you see a youngster at this awkward in-between stage trying to reach for independence remember if now, when? If you feel insulted because you think the child doesn't feel at home in your house, remember that when it comes to food, they are not really at home anywhere (besides home, of course). Please keep in mind that these adolescents are the ones who feel goofy and awkward and left out. They can't bear to hurt your feelings. They want and need their friends now more than ever.

A few final words: my physiotherapist, the last person I want to offend, invited me to her house for lunch, which turned out to be a poached salmon salad. I explained that I recently discovered that I am seriously allergic to salmon, and that without an EpiPen® handy, I might die if I ate it. She insisted on taking out the minute pieces of flaked fish. I explained, feeling like an insufferable ingrate, that the smallest amount would make me very sick.

I never understood my daughter's challenges more than when I was in her shoes. You get the point. In an ideal world, friends want what is best for you. And for kids with serious food allergies, "best" always means "safe".

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