

## **Reducing Parental Stress**

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Anxiety is expected when any child goes to school, especially for the first time. New teachers, new schools, new friends, new rules...these changes bring anxiety as well as excitement for both the parents and the child.

When a child also has to cope with asthma or food allergies, there is more to think about and more to worry about. Parents sometimes feel overwhelmed. They know that it is not easy for them to deal with asthma and food allergies at home and it can be daunting to turn this responsibility over to the school.

Children may also be stressed, although not necessarily for the same reasons as parents. They may be less worried about their allergies or asthma than about being able to find the bathroom or whether the teacher will like them! Talking to children about their concerns often reassures them.

Keeping in mind that some degree of parental anxiety is normal, what can be done to keep it from ruining the start of the school year for you and your child? First of all, try to separate your own feelings of anxiety from the concrete task of preparing your child to cope with his allergy or asthma at school. Learn to recognize escalating anxiety and try to pinpoint the underlying reasons. Perhaps you are feeling that others do not understand the seriousness of the allergy. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by preparations for school and simply don't know what to do next. You are probably not sure if your child is "ready" to cope on his/her own. On top of all of these worries, there may be an underlying sense that you are losing control over your child's environment. These anxieties are common in parents of allergic children. The trick is to recognize that you are anxious, minimize risks as much as possible, and try not to let your anxiety affect your child.

Sometimes simply talking to a friend or spouse can help. It is especially helpful if you can talk to other parents of allergic children who have successfully dealt with these issues. Try to focus on positive aspects of the start of school and plan some relaxing activities, for the family or for yourself so that you can focus on something that you enjoy.

Try not to obsess about relatively unlikely risks or "worst case" scenarios, because this can be really upsetting and is not helpful. Deal with the major risks, take comfort in the fact that you carry medication, and then deal with the highly unlikely minor risks.

Good advance preparation helps to help you ensure that the school environment is a safe one. Start early.

As much as possible try not to let your anxiety be passed on to your child. Prepare your child to be responsible in a positive manner and give some thought to your child's social needs. As we've said before, a child tends to adopt the coping style of the parent and a positive, optimistic, prepared child is not only happier but also safer.

In the long run, the goal should be to prepare your child to be as secure as possible in all situations, at school and elsewhere, whether allergens are present or not. Education and preparation of your own child is crucial, more important than any school "rules", so put most of your energy there.

Stay in touch with teachers and administrators and volunteer in the school if you can. Offer to help set up an "allergy committee" at school with the goal of minimizing risks and enhancing the school experience for all children. Try to "enforce" your school's allergy policy in a positive manner, exploring alternatives and thanking others for their help in reducing risks.

### **Legalities, etc.**

- Ask for a copy of your school board's written policies with respect to allergies and medical emergencies. If adequate policies have not been developed, volunteer to get a committee together to work on this and, in the meantime, put in writing all the arrangements that need to be in place for your child.
- Meet with the administration, teacher and school nurse but follow up with a letter noting agreed-upon arrangements.
- Be polite, firm and supportive of the school's efforts to help you and your child. Keep lines of communication open.
- *Never* sign a waiver absolving the school of responsibility should the epinephrine auto-injector not be used.
- *Give* written authorization to the institution to use the auto-injector in case of emergency.
- Be prepared to offer proof of diagnosis, usually a doctor's letter or prescription for the auto-injector.
- Make sure that the child's name and allergies, as well as a photograph, are in a location where all teachers and staff, including lunchroom supervisors and substitute teachers, will see it. Be sure that the location of the medications is clearly indicated.

*Please support AAIA in our efforts to inform and support the community regarding allergy and asthma. Donate and/or become a member today by calling 1-800-662-7011 or visit us on the web at [www.aaia.ca](http://www.aaia.ca).*