

Why Don't We Just Ban Peanuts (and Nuts) At School?

By Nancy Wiebe

Having your doctor say that your child or someone in your care has a life-threatening allergy is a very intimidating and scary thing. Once we get over that shock, other questions come to our minds such as: How do we cope with this? How can we keep our child safe? How can we help others understand, raise their awareness and get their cooperation? In this article, I will outline why I think bans on foods do not work for the benefit of our children, their friends or the school.

One of the keys to living with life-threatening allergies is dealing with the issues of **control and fear**. I think these two issues are at the root of asking for food bans. In preschool days, we can generally control the child's food and environment, which is comfortable for parents. Of course, there is always an underlying fear of a reaction occurring. However, at school and other settings, there are many things we cannot control and we are naturally concerned about the child being safe. We need to learn what is controllable and achievable, take the necessary precautions and not let fear take over.

First, we must teach our child about the allergy and help him/her learn the skills they need to keep themselves safe. This is a gradual process. They must learn that it's *their* allergy and that the world will not necessarily change to accommodate them. They need to learn to take precautions, to get others' cooperation and understanding, and accept that they can live a normal life. An individualized, physician prescribed treatment plan will help them to understand the emergency procedures and feel more in control. Handling the allergy should be like any other issue in a child's life...offering the most protection when young and teaching them to be more independent and responsible as they get older.

Second, we parents must become teachers and advocates. There is quite a learning curve to truly understanding the impact of this allergy, especially for those not living with it. Try to imagine learning about living with diabetes. The information will be repeated many times in many different venues. Doing just one presentation at school is not enough. Lots of diplomacy and patience are needed because change is difficult for most of us. We as parents must also be flexible, recognizing that there is no one strategy or policy that works for every child and school. It will take discussion and negotiation. Through education, we can build understanding, cooperation and encourage a "village" mentality that will help others, particularly classmates, want to make the necessary changes which will make the environment safer.

Here are some reasons for not banning peanuts and nuts for the whole school (although I believe that there need to be provisions for peanut/nut-free *areas* of an elementary school):

- *There is no such thing as a "peanut/nut-free" school.* You can never guarantee that a school doesn't have peanuts or nuts without bodily searching everyone and everything all the time. This has been attempted with very negative results. Even then, kids can have peanut butter on their hands from breakfast at home. We can't assume that any place is free of peanuts and nuts.
- *"Peanut/nut-free" gives everyone a feeling of false security, which in turn encourages complacency in the school about dealing with life-threatening allergies.* The kids with allergies can become lax about the precautions they need to take because they think they are in a "safe" environment. Parents may think their job of educating and raising awareness (in their children and the school) is no longer necessary. School staff will direct their attention to other higher profile concerns.
- *When a ban goes into place, often the energy and effort moves from educating and raising awareness to enforcing the ban.* A ban can also single out the children with allergies and make them susceptible

to bullying. The children need to learn to “fit in” and have self-confidence, and not let their identity revolve around having the allergy. This will help them handle bullies and avoid being targets for bullies.

- *Telling people they can't have something because of a few is antagonistic to many parents and uncomfortable for the school.* Generally our generation does not react well to the word "BAN". When banning has been implemented, it usually takes about a year for the backlash to develop. By then, it becomes very difficult to retreat to a more “middle-of-the-road” approach because the parents who are upset are unwilling to listen or cooperate.
- *There are other life-threatening triggers such as milk, wheat or eggs, which would be impossible to ban. Where do you stop?* The school must meet many needs, often from competing agendas. We must be sympathetic to what the administrators have to deal with. We will get better cooperation if we ask for things which can be implemented with a reasonable amount of effort, while accomplishing what we need.
- *A continuing awareness program brings protection.* Non-allergic children will often be more cooperative than their parents and offer to avoid bringing peanut/nut items if it means that those items could harm a friend. They will be protective and more self-regulating than if we rely on a ban to “force” compliance. In turn, the children will be more aware of others with different needs, and will take their awareness into adulthood with them. However, this education effort must start early. By Grade 6, some kids are bringing in cigarettes and drugs, so convincing them not to bring peanuts probably will not be effective.
- *The kids with allergies must gradually learn to “own” their allergy and take responsibility for the precautions for safely handling their allergy. **They will never live in a peanut/nut free world and they must learn to live with it.*** Junior and Senior high schools will not be as accommodating as their elementary school. School is a good place for them to gradually learn the survival skills they will need. The environment is supervised by adults, and emergency help is not far away if needed. As they get older, they will get used to wearing MedicAlert® ID, carrying their EpiPen® (as prescribed by their treatment plan), and to explaining their allergy to others and asking for their cooperation. By the time they are teenagers, these precautions will be a natural part of their life. That acceptance will help them resist peer pressure and be more comfortable about having the allergy. Their friends will also have a better understanding of the precautions needed to make their friend safe.

You can get a good start on starting an awareness program by getting handouts and materials to help you. Many of these are available at the Calgary Allergy Network website at <http://www.calgaryallergy.ca> or at your local allergy/asthma association. Another excellent reference is a publication by the Canadian School Boards Association called “Anaphylaxis: A Handbook for School Boards”. You can order one for \$10 by calling (613) 235-3724 or email admin@CdnSBA.org. It presents a balanced approach for starting an allergy awareness policy in your school.

Banning allergen-containing items is not the answer for dealing with life-threatening allergies. Peanut butter is not only a traditional food, but it is an economic necessity for many families. It won't disappear from the lunch menu. We must prepare our children to live in the real world while providing a “safety cushion” at school to help them learn the skills they need to live a long, healthy life with their allergy. **Let's work towards helping our schools become “peanut/nut-safe and allergy aware.”**

Nancy Wiebe is the parent of a child with peanut and nut allergies. May be reproduced for educational, non-profit purposes only. This article provided courtesy of the Calgary Allergy Network web site at <http://www.calgaryallergy.ca>.