



Making the Case for a Food Policy for Food Allergic Children

Keeping All Children Safe, Happy and Included

by Kristin Beltaos

Suzi's mom is bringing in birthday cupcakes on Friday.

Can you count how many Goldfish® crackers are on the table?

After the race, everyone will receive a doughnut!

Our Winter Festival project is a gingerbread house.

These situations are common occurrences in early childhood programs. Within nearly all cultures, sharing food is a social constant. It's a primary way to



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connect with one another. However, for a food allergic child, events surrounded by unsafe food consistently remind the child of their food allergy, their lack of belonging, and the feeling of being unsafe. We need to always consider what happens when this intrinsic way of connection is circumvented with life-threatening food allergies.

As the diagnoses of food allergies become more prevalent, so are the skyrocketing numbers. According to Food Allergy Research and Education, 15 million Americans are living with a food allergy, and 5.9 million children have a diagnosed food allergy—that equates to two to three children per typical classroom. The most common food culprits, known as the “Top 8 Allergens,” are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat.

We live in a society that socializes, celebrates, incentivizes, rewards, crafts, and learns with food. It's important that we examine the messages that we send children about food. Moreover, what is the message that we send children when we choose to socially stigmatize or isolate children who cannot participate

May is Food Allergy Awareness Month

How can you pay this information forward and create more awareness in your community?

in certain activities? We need to evaluate our activities and determine how we can maintain the integrity of social and learning experiences while removing the food. A food policy supports the establishment of best practices for food allergies, while also addressing other concerns: curriculum, social activities and celebrations, other medical conditions, and cultural sensitivity.

Birthdays: The Struggle Is Real

There are many ways to create not only a more inclusive environment, but also a more creative environment. Education environments of the 1970s and '80s didn't depend on food as much as we currently do in our curriculum and seasonal activities. When we develop

learning and social activities, food is often the first thing that comes to mind, because it is tradition. We're celebrating a birthday so we bake cupcakes. To do things differently may require us to break from tradition, instead of falling back on the idea that this is what we've always done.

To be more creative, determine how to emphasize the individuality of the birthday child. Perhaps the birthday child has a special interest in trains, horses or LEGO® bricks. Use that unique interest to celebrate the child. Perhaps you can read a book about trains or build with Legos. All children will fondly remember the experience of an activity focused on a birthday child's special interest far beyond the moment the cupcake liner hits the trash.

Allergies Don't Have to Spoil the Celebration

No one ever wants to be a wet blanket when it comes to learning and socializing; however, food allergy worries stem from a child being in an unsafe environment, especially when it's related to a life-threatening disease. During the early years, children lack the ability to keep their hands away from their face, heightening the risk for a child to accidentally come in contact with allergens by mouth, nose, and eyes.

Many early childhood and school age providers and educators are moving to celebrations based upon each room's allergy needs. This means that if room A has a child with a peanut allergy, then no item with peanuts as an ingredient or that has been processed on shared equipment with peanuts will be used in the classroom. Evolving to this type of practice allows for periodic use of food in the classroom in a safe and inclusive manner.

The Abolishment of Food

Meeting the needs of many allergic children can feel overwhelming, causing us to eliminate food from all learning and social activities. For some groups who are using food to excess, this might be the crash diet you need to provide clarity in your organization's food philosophy.

During the course of a food policy evaluation, some may decide to ban food and become "nut-free" or "peanut aware." To be sure, groups can vigorously debate the value of banning versus permitting an allergen on the premises. It is recommended that one tread with caution prior to instating a peanut or nut ban because if you ban one allergen, are you willing to ban another? According to Dr. Sami Bahna, president of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, "If we are going to eliminate peanuts, and another child is allergic to hazelnuts, and another child is allergic to milk, and another child to wheat — there's no end to this." (Fulton, 2010.)

Food bans are also inadvisable because they create a false sense of security, possibly letting your guard down for an accidental exposure or risk. Also, will one really be able to police such a ban?

Food awareness for early childhood care environments seems more logical. An alternative view comes from Susan Wasserman, who teaches medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. She believes there is one area where food awareness needs to be a high priority:

"I have never been a big advocate of bans, but I think that for younger children, toddler-age day care, where you have a lot of young children who can't be counted on to sort of watch for themselves, to keep their hands and desk surfaces clean, not enough staff supervision, then it makes sense to ask parents to not bring certain foods into the classroom" (Fulton, 2010). Focusing efforts on how to create safe and inclusive environ-

ments without food bans is usually the best path.

Finally, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Decision Guidance (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014) states that in order to provide a least restrictive learning environment, classroom environments should "ban the offending product, rather than isolating the student to put him or her at a separate allergen-free table, for example, which could have the effect of stigmatizing the student and isolating him or her from appropriate social interaction. Several school districts in the United States and Canada ban the food product in classrooms if a child's allergy is life threatening" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014).

What Messages Are We Sending Children About Food?

"Once the race is complete, everyone will receive a doughnut!"

Be sure that rewards positively support the accomplishment and teach healthy dietary choices and inclusive ways to celebrate. If you feel the need to reward children for reaching a physical fitness goal, then it is best to make certain the reward correlates to physical fitness. Instead of a doughnut, provide a bottle of water, additional recess time, or an inexpensive medal. An even better idea is to teach that the reward is in the accomplishment itself; in doing so, you can model for children the positive feeling of a job well done.

Seasonal parties and activities can encourage differences if "safe for all" options cannot be found and provided. Some might think that if cupcakes are served then it's perfectly fine to have an allergic child sit with popcorn if that is his/her "safe treat." However, you cannot look at these treats and equate them as being in the same category. How do we solve this dilemma? If you're having a celebration, then it means you

must find a treat that is safe for all based upon their unique dietary requirements.

A Common Landscape

It's fascinating how when we are confronted with a challenging situation, such as creating a safe environment for a food allergic child, our initial instinct is to determine how a child will adapt to our environment, rather than how the environment can be modified so that it's safe for everyone. When we only address the individual child it will almost always create what I have termed a "Spotlight of Difference™" on that child (Rowell, 2016).

In our efforts to create safe environments for children with food allergies, parents and schools alike often shine an unnecessary Spotlight of Difference™ on these children, which I believe is a catalyst for anxiety in food allergic children, as well as food allergy teasing and bullying.

When we segregate or isolate, we communicate a very unwelcoming message to the allergic child: Our activity is more important than your need to be safe and included. In that same vein, we communicate to the child's peers that it's okay to exclude at our own convenience. We need to understand that safety does not always equal separateness and vice versa. It's important for us to acknowledge that when we segregate or isolate, there are consequences for the children. Unfortunately, it's our inability to view the picture creatively and holistically that causes us to travel the easy route.

When I conduct trainings on this topic, I have participants work through real-life examples on how to create more inclusiveness and diminish the Spotlight of Difference™. It's really stirring to see people get creative and excited about how to make life better for a food allergic child. Often we don't like what is happening, such as an allergy table or a child with food allergies eating a different treat than everyone else, but we

don't take the time to think about how we might do it differently.

The Beauty of a Food Policy

All of the issues above can be resolved with a clear food policy in our programs, specifically with regard to food allergies. It's important to note that there are many other conditions, although not all are life threatening, that will benefit from the establishment of a food policy. These include food intolerances, celiac, diabetes, ADD, ADHD, Autism Spectrum, and obesity. In addition, a food policy can help you and your staff become more aware of how food is used throughout your program, including holiday observances, art projects, and other celebrations. This is one aspect of multicultural and anti-bias curricula that builds cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.

Examine, decide, and document your program's food philosophy in a food policy. By establishing a policy up-front, and not evaluating an activity on a case-by-case basis—in the middle of an unsafe activity or during an activity crisis—you can ensure that all children are kept safe, happy and included.

Here are some questions to consider as you get started:

1. Do we want food included in our program? For what purposes?
2. Will we only have activities with safe food for all?
3. What is an acceptable frequency for the use of food in our activities?
4. Do we want to consider a no-food policy and develop more creative activities?

A policy provides a straightforward, no-nonsense, standardized approach for individuals, staff, and parents. Resources such as the Center for Disease Control

Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools and Early Care and Education Programs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013) can provide background information on food allergies as well as food allergy management. Once a food policy is in place, every activity can be tested against it: Does this activity align with our food policy?

In our society, invisible disabilities and challenges cause many to question the disability and its impact on people's lives. When you look at food allergic children, it's difficult to understand the life-threatening nature of their condition when they aren't in the throes of a severe, potentially life-threatening allergic (anaphylactic) reaction. These individuals look healthy, yet unfortunately are regularly judged by others.

I challenge us to rethink our approach and become more compassionate and thoughtful in the way we address people with food allergies and other invisible disabilities. The establishment of a food policy shows that we are empathetic and thoughtful about the challenges that these children face and demonstrates our willingness to create an inclusive environment where all children can feel safe, happy and included.

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Resources

American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI): www.aaaai.org

AAAAI is a professional organization with nearly 7,000 members in the United States, Canada and 72 other countries. This membership includes allergist / immunologists, other medical specialists, allied health and related healthcare professionals—all with a special interest in the research and treatment of allergic and immunologic diseases. It is dedicated to the advancement of the knowledge and practice of allergy, asthma and immunology for optimal patient care.

The American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI): www.acaai.org

ACAAI, established in 1942, is a professional association of more than 6,000 physicians and allied health professionals who are subspecialists in asthma, allergic diseases, and immune disorders. The college develops and disseminates educational information to patients and other health care professionals.

"An Emerging Epidemic: Food Allergies in America" (Discovery Channel 2013): <https://vimeo.com/73910827>

This hour-long documentary, narrated by Steve Carell, explores what it is like to live with life-threatening food allergies, how families and individuals managing food allergies are working to raise awareness in their communities, and the vital research underway to find effective treatments and a cure.

Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE): www.foodallergy.org

FARE works on behalf of the 15 million Americans with food allergies, including all those at risk for life-threatening anaphylaxis. This potentially deadly disease affects 1 in 13 children in the United States – or roughly two in every classroom. FARE's mission is to improve the quality of life and the health of individuals with food allergies, and to provide them hope through the promise of new treatments.

A Gift of Miles: Food Allergy Consulting: <http://www.agiftofmiles.com/>

A Gift of Miles offers support to individuals, parents, childcare providers and schools to successfully navigate and grow during times of transition. Our programs are designed to decrease stress and increase quality of life all while finding, creating and flourishing in a new normal.