

## **Raising a Well-Adjusted Child Who Happens to Have Life-Threatening Food Allergies**

**by Linda Marienhoff Coss**

A few months ago a mother of a recently-diagnosed food-allergic toddler observed that my 16-year-old food-allergic son seems to take his allergies in stride. He wears his fanny pack, brings his food to parties, follows our family's food safety protocols, and so forth – all without making an issue of it. In short, he is what many parents of young food-allergic children fear is not possible: well-adjusted.

“How did you do it?” she asked me. “Can you give some advice so others can do the same?”

Well, although some of the credit has to go to my son and his personality, I also have to assume that I've done something right. So here are my words of wisdom...

### **It Starts With You**

How well your child copes will be heavily influenced by how well *you* cope. Take a close look at your attitude. Whether you like it or not, your attitude will have a significant affect on your child's attitude and self-esteem. We all know that managing a child's life-threatening food allergies is a constant challenge, but there's a big attitude difference between “rising to meet the challenge” and “feeling overwhelmed by the burden.” To paraphrase an old song, keep in mind that “he's not heavy, he's my child.”

Someone once said to me, “God gives the average children to the average parents, and saves the extraordinary children for the extraordinary parents.” So there you have it – you're not burdened, you're privileged!

### **Never Let 'Em See You Sweat**

Especially when he is young, don't let your child realize how much effort you put into keeping him safe and making things work. Although *you* will have to make major adjustments in your life to accommodate his needs and keep him safe, and *you* will often need to go through a lot of advance preparation when your family wants to go somewhere or do something, *your child* does not need to know this. This knowledge can make him feel as though his mere existence is a burden for you.

For example, instead of saying “I've spent the past month talking to the school trying to change their policies so you won't be surrounded by allergens,” say “Great news! Your teacher, who's a very nice lady, will be working with me to keep you safe.” It's all in the presentation.

### **Make Your Home A Safe Haven**

Most books and articles about living with severe food allergy recommend physically making your home a “safe haven” where you and your child do not have to worry about

allergenic foods on the dinner plate or allergenic residue in the toy box. Take this a step further and make your home an emotional “safe haven” as well. Teach all of your children that in your family you treat each other with love, respect and acceptance – and then model this behavior yourself.

### **Don't Let Food Allergies Define Your Child**

Food allergy is a medical condition, not a personality trait. Make your child feel so loved and accepted *as she is* that the allergies do not define her, your relationship with her, or other people's relationships with her. She is not “allergy girl” – she is an amazing, wonderful, beautiful, much-beloved and appreciated child.

### **Don't Make Your Life Revolve Around Food**

Create a healthy, loving and enjoyable lifestyle for your family that doesn't revolve around food – a good idea even without food allergies in the picture, now that obesity has become such a problem in our nation. Foster an attitude in your child that “food isn't everything” and “it really doesn't matter if you can't eat a particular thing.”

### **Exude Confidence**

When your child is old enough to understand the inherent dangers of severe food allergies, don't give him reason to worry. Let your child know that you are in control of the situation. Discuss some of the precautions you and other caregivers take to keep him safe, such as reading labels, washing hands, keeping medication handy, etc. The message: You know what you're doing, and you always do everything possible to keep him safe.

### **Remember That Everyone Is Different**

Teach your child that everyone is “different” and there is nothing wrong with being different. Every person has something different about them...from hair and freckles to skills, talents, beliefs, personality, and more. Food allergies are just one of the things that makes your child unique – but not as unique as she might think. As of this writing, it is estimated that 1 out of 25 school-aged children in the U.S. have food allergies! The world would be a much dull place if we were all the same.

### **Arm Your Child**

Of course, since not everyone understands that “different” is okay, you'll need to be sure that your child is prepared for both polite questions and hurtful teasing. Role play with your child. How will she answer the questions her classmates might raise, such as “Why do you always bring your lunch?” “Why can't you have ice cream?” Or “Do you want to try the cookies my Grandma made?” Hopefully your child will not be the object of teasing, but in case she is, explain that the teasing is likely to stop if it doesn't get the desired response. Practice delivering snappy comeback lines with an attitude that says “your teasing doesn't bother me.”

### **Don't Be Left Out**

Do everything you can to ensure that your child has as “normal” a life as possible. Your child deserves to have positive school and extra-curricular activities experiences and an enjoyable social life. Work “behind the scenes” to make it happen.

**Empower Your Child**

As your child gets older, empower him to be increasingly responsible for staying safe. For example, as his maturity increases you should teach him to read labels, advocate for his needs, carry his own medications, order in restaurants and explain his allergies to others.

**In Conclusion**

Just like every other aspect of managing your child's life-threatening food allergies, helping him or her to be well adjusted "in spite of it all" requires forethought and effort. Know that you can do it – and that there's a whole community of people here at Kids With Food Allergies available to help you.

This article was previously published in Kids With Food Allergies' Support Net, and has been reprinted with permission.