

## What School Nurses Need to Know about Families of Children with Food Allergies

Caring for students with food allergies requires a comprehensive management approach with an emphasis on forming a partnership with the family. Health and education outcomes are significantly better if school nursing care is family centered.<sup>1-3</sup> School nurses work with families to effectively manage their child's condition. While the nurse might be experienced in managing children with food allergies, parents/caregivers view their child's condition as unique and they are the experts in that child's care.

Parents/caregivers are faced with placing their child's safety and potentially their child's life in the hands of a school nurse they do not know. A child with food allergies may seriously affect the family's quality of life. Parents/caregivers want to be assured that their child's food allergy doesn't affect the quality of their child's education and that the school is committed to ensuring their child's safety. The school nurse has important role in responding sensitively to these concerns, providing reassurance that the school has plans in place for their child's needs, supporting their interest in providing a safe and normal learning environment, and alleviating much of the anxiety parents/caregivers feel when their child is at school.<sup>4-10</sup>

When school nurses are aware of the factors that affect families of children with food allergies, they can better address the student and family-centered goals when the child's plan of care is developed. Some these factors include:

- Lack of confidence in the school's ability to address food allergies.<sup>4-5</sup>
- Stress and anxiety about a new exposure to the known allergen at the start of a new school year or when changing school environments.<sup>6,8</sup>
- Past negative experiences with school personnel and other families about lack of acceptance, recognition of their child's condition, and/or requested accommodations.<sup>5,8,10</sup>
- Feeling isolated caring for their child; this social isolation can impact parent/caregiver coping mechanisms significantly.<sup>4,10</sup>

School nurses should keep in mind families of children with food allergies are under significant duress:

- Mothers of children with food allergies report poorer quality of life and poorer relationships than other mothers.<sup>5,7</sup>
- Parents/caregivers encounter many health professionals who give conflicting advice on how to keep their child safe.<sup>5,10,11</sup>
- Families are burdened with significant costs, including the cost of Epi-pens, cost of special foods, and transportation and time off work to visit allergists and immunologists.<sup>4,10</sup>
- In addition to preparing allergen free meals, low allergen foods can be difficult to find. Many parents visit multiple stores to find non allergic foods.

School nurses can decrease the stress and anxiety of families using several approaches:

- Implementing evidence-based strategies to prevent allergen exposure and prepare school personnel to respond to anaphylaxis
- Acknowledging parents/caregiver concerns
- Emphasizing that the school takes food allergy seriously
- Suggesting opportunities to decrease their social isolation and to connect with other families
- Arranging for the school social worker to seek financial assistance and support

Family outcomes when these approaches are used include:

- Feeling their unique stressors and burdens have been recognized
- Enhanced trust that the school is prepared to protect their child's health and safety because of the planning process and communication

- Reduced anxiety
- Confidence that their child will experience a positive health and learning environment at school

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