



TAKING ON **BULLYING**

How to spot food allergy bullying – and bring it to a stop. By Janet French

It's the kind of story that parents dread – a schoolyard bully waving an allergen-filled sandwich in a vulnerable kid's face.

Studies have found that about one-third of children and teens with food allergies are bullied, simply because of this condition. Definitions of bullying vary, but children report they've been taunted, teased, threatened and, in some cases, had life-threatening allergens thrust in their faces, or even slipped into their lunch boxes surreptitiously.

The threatening behavior was mostly likely to happen at school, with classmates

as the perpetrators – although in a minority of cases, school staff were also faulted for teasing or singling out.

A wakeup call came in a 2013 Mount Sinai Medical Center study. It found that almost half of parents were unaware their children felt they had been bullied due to their allergies. Families are wise to ready themselves to counter allergy bullying, given its frequency.

The repercussions for harassed children can be substantial. Not only could they potentially consume a life-threatening

allergen, researchers have found bullied children have higher levels of anxiety and a lower quality of life. (They do fare better when their parents are aware of the bullying). Surveys also have revealed that children receiving unwanted attention about their food allergies had more trouble managing the allergies, and were less likely to wear medical identification.

Allergic Living asked two psychology experts who work with allergic children and teens what families can do to identify and put an end to food allergy bullying.

How to Spot Bullying

Set the stage for open communication before any trouble arises. Talk about your day and ask children open-ended questions about theirs. Sudden anxiety about going to school or changes in your child's routine could be signs that something is wrong.

Research shows that kids don't always know what constitutes "bullying." Dr. Linda Herbert directs the psychosocial clinical and research program at Children's National Health System's division of allergy and immunology in Washington, D.C. She suggests asking kids how their day was, who they ate lunch with, or whether there were any surprises in their day.

Dr. Eyal Shemesh, a pediatrician and psychiatrist at the school of medicine at New York's Mount Sinai, asks all his patients with food allergies about their experiences with other children: "Does anyone give you a hard time about your allergies? Who did you tell?" Parents can try these questions, too.

With less-than forthcoming teens, try talking to their friends or their parents if you suspect your teen may be having a rough time at school.

If Your Child is Bullied

Reassure the child the bullying is not their fault, and that you will help them.

Record the basic details of any bullying incidents. Note when and where the incidents happened, who was present – including adult witnesses, and what they did or said.

Once you've heard from your child, contact the school. Ask for a copy of the school's bullying policy and provide copies of any notes, photos or texts about the incidents.

If threatened with an allergenic food, Shemesh says a child should be taught to run away to avoid a dangerous situation, and to tell an adult immediately. Children should be advised not to fight back – even if they want to.

If a teen faces threats online, capture screenshots of all messages. Threatening texts or social media messages from classmates should be reported to school leaders, since school anti-bullying policies increasingly include online misconduct.

If bullying is ongoing, do validate a child's feelings. It's normal to be sad or scared when someone is threatening you. Herbert encourages having the child spend time with supportive friends.

Schools usually take reports of bullying seriously, and will speak to a child accused of bullying and that child's parents. *Allergic Living* notes that the school's response will depend on the seriousness of the incident and could range from a discussion with the student and their parents to a suspension. In more serious situations, the police may be contacted.

In successful anti-bullying programs, the emphasis is on helping the bullied child, re-educating the bully, and preventing future situations through programs that involve the entire school population.

Prevention Approaches

An allergy bullying study, co-authored by Shemesh, found several children reporting that harassment continued over months or years. If school staff seem dismissive of concerns that allergy bullying is arising, he suggests having the child's doctor call the principal to explain the potentially serious health risks involved.

Once a student is a pre-teen or a teen, Herbert's view is that not everyone in class needs to know about that student's food allergies. Teachers can make general announcements about keeping specific foods out of the classroom.

Schools should create a culture of safety where students are encouraged to report any threatening behavior. It's not "tattling" if a classmate is being put at risk.

Allergic Living

Reprinted from *Allergic Living* magazine. Visit Allergicliving.com