

Editorial: Childhood Obesity & Food Allergies

Denise Lewis, Founder, Food Allergy Connection - Childhood obesity and food allergies are two major health issues on the rise in children. Both of these conditions involve food, and both problems are of such concern that efforts are being made nationally to come up with ways to keep our children safe from the effects of these conditions.

School districts nationwide have already begun making their cafeteria foods healthier, and from professional organizations to the grass roots efforts of concerned parents across the country, steps are being taken to establish effective and consistent protocols to keep our food-allergic children safe at school. When comparing food allergies with childhood obesity, I see some additional ways our nation's schools can help with both. Clearly, our nation's school system is only one area of concern when it comes to childhood obesity and food allergies, but since our children spend so much time in school, it's worth focusing on now.

There has always been a significant emphasis on food in our schools, starting in preschool. Preschoolers and Kindergarteners normally attend school for 2-1/2 - 3 hours. Most children eat breakfast or lunch before going to school. About an hour or so into their school day, the children are given a snack. An hour or two later they go home and eat again. Even some hour-long special programs for children involve a snack. Then you have the seemingly endless birthday treats, treats as incentives, treats during testing time and treat bags as fund-raisers in the secondary schools, treats at after-school activities, and the list goes on. These traditions affect children from preschool to high school and may be creating more problems than we need.

Snack time is a fun time of day for our children, and it helps teach them how to socialize and develop table manners. However, many of the foods served to children at school, especially for birthday celebrations and class parties, are "fun" foods, i.e., "junk" foods. These foods are not only contributing to the obesity problem in children, they're also making the lives of those affected by food-allergies, such as students, teachers and parents, very complicated and stressful. When food allergies are involved, the teacher is under a tremendous amount of pressure to monitor all food being served and has the huge responsibility of keeping the food-allergic children safe. All parents are affected as well, from the allergic child's parents to the other parents who are forced to deal with the new restrictions that may have been implemented due to the food allergy. Then you have the food-allergic children who worry every time food is served, especially when away from home. Finding alternatives to snack time, birthday treats, class parties and other food-related activities would go a long way in helping with childhood obesity as well as food allergies. Here are some ideas to consider:

Downplay food in the school setting:

- Offer a healthy drink instead of food.
- Allow extra recess time in lieu of snack time, which would encourage more physical activity and take the focus off of food.
- Offer non-food treats for birthday celebrations and academic incentives such as stickers or other party favors.
- Play games or sing songs at school birthday parties instead of serving snacks.
- Have a special show-and-tell time featuring the birthday child, a friendly "roast" of the birthday child or a time for classmates to share special memories they've shared with the birthday child.

Offer only healthy snacks:

- Serve only fruits and vegetables (unless one of the children has allergies to any of these). This can also be fun and educational by seeing how creative you can be with the preparation and presentation.
- Serve healthy store-bought snacks with ingredient and nutrition labels. Use this as an opportunity to teach the children about nutrition and food allergies by teaching them how to read labels to determine whether or not a food is healthy and safe.

Children have plenty of time for "fun, junk" food while away from school, so why not let the parents decide for themselves whether or not they want their children to eat this type of food? Working together with the schools to develop alternatives to food-related activities will go a long way in combating two serious health concerns in our nation's children. It may also make the lives of students, teachers and parents a bit less stressful along the way. Implementing these new "traditions" from as young an age as possible will encourage our children to grow up with healthier attitudes about food, making childhood obesity and accidental allergic reactions at school less common.

- Denise contributed this opinion article to Go Dairy Free, which is originally entitled: "Schools Can Help Combat Childhood Obesity While Lessening the Risk of Food Allergies in our Children."

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