

# Don't let food allergies spoil your child's fun

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Children with food allergies might experience heightened anxiety over social situations involving food. They face the risk of being exposed to an allergen, or conversely, feeling excluded from normal childhood activities, such as enjoying treats at a birthday party. A Baylor College of Medicine psychologist explains how parents can alleviate this stress while teaching them to be mindful of their allergies.

"You should be honest with your kids in an age-appropriate fashion that allows them to understand any true limitations, while empowering them with things they are able to do and their ability to self-advocate," said Dr. Eric Storch, professor and vice chair of psychology in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor.

Parents must take an active role in modeling appropriate questions for [children](#) at an early age, while providing reassurance that their child will be safe and can engage with foods with certain precautions. As children get older, help them ask these questions on their own, including asking about food preparation and ingredients. Provide feedback and practice so that as they enter adolescence, they can effectively ask questions independently, whether they are at a friend's house or a birthday party. Rehearse how to ask questions and practice certain steps if your child accidentally ingests an [allergen](#). Parents should communicate to school and daycare personnel about their child's allergies if they are too young to ask questions on their own.

When teaching children to be cautious of certain foods or [ingredients](#), be direct. Think about how your child learns best. For many children, pictorial stimuli can be beneficial: show them a laminated sheet of paper containing images of off-limits foods with an X marked through them, along with foods they can eat. Accompany this with a list of questions to practice.

Storch encourages parents to normalize their child's allergies by embracing differences and challenges among others. He suggests finding books oriented toward children that discuss differences and the beauty of difference, as well as how children can deal with those challenges.

"The most effective way to deal with it is to embrace it and learn how to successfully manage it," he said. "Ask questions and be vigilant."

Children with food allergies might feel excluded at events where other children get to indulge. If your child is attending a birthday party or event with food they cannot consume, parents can help them cope:

- Minimize the impact: if your child can't eat the birthday cake provided, bring one they can eat so they enjoy a sweet treat with their peers.
- Communicate with parents: inform other parents about your child's allergy ahead of time so they can plan accordingly.
- Reassure your child: Focus on the positives in your child's life as opposed to this one difference and appreciate that this difference could be worse.

Cognitive behavioral principles can be helpful for children who feel overly anxious about the risk of contact with food allergens. This therapy entails facing unrealistic fears directly, as well as learning ways to challenge anxious thinking.

"Convey the severity of the situation while also conveying there is a clear solution and effective method of coping," Storch said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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