

ASTHMA & ALLERGY BULLETIN

ASTHMA AND ALLERGY FOUNDATION OF AMERICA • NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER

Advocacy at School for Your Food Allergic Child

by Laurel Francoeur

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an advocate as someone who (1) pleads the cause of another; specifically: one that pleads the cause of another before a tribunal or judicial court; (2) defends or maintains a cause or proposal; (3) supports or promotes the interests of another.

Anyone has the power to be an advocate. You can plead your child's case, and it is your job to support and promote the interests of your child. You don't need a fancy degree or influential connections. You do need confidence in yourself. As a parent, you are used to being the voice for your child. You need to take that same voice and be willing to use it in whatever context is necessary to keep your child safe and happy.

The following are the qualities you need to be a successful advocate:

1. Be Knowledgeable

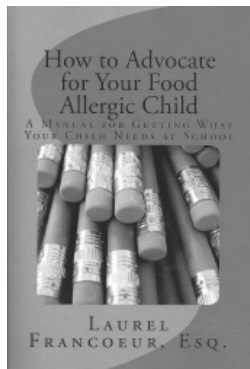
A good advocate is someone who is knowledgeable and passionate about his subject. Educate yourself about food allergies in general and also the specifics about your child's allergy. The more you know, the better you can address all the needs your child will face.

2. Be Passionate Without Being Obnoxious

If you do not believe in your cause, no one else will either. Speak from the heart and let the school know why the issues are important to you. Let them know that you are afraid for your child's safety and mental well-being. However, don't go overboard and get too emotional. Do not act mad or mean – just passionate.

3. Know Your Rights

An advocate knows what rights are available and who is in charge of enforcing those rights. Read as much as you can about your rights and even consult an attorney if necessary. For



example, your child is entitled to a free and appropriate education. If your child has a disability, he may be entitled to receive accommodations from the school under federal law. He has the right not to face discrimination. A

good place to start your research is with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, which has a nice summary of rights at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/know.html>.

4. Know the Players

Identify who at your school is responsible for overseeing your child. Learn the names of the main players like the school nurse, the principal, and the teacher. Use every opportunity available to familiarize yourself with these people so you can understand their personalities. Pay attention at parent/teacher conferences and school activities to how the players act and treat children. Ask other parents about their dealings with the school.

5. Write Everything Down and be Organized

Any time your child encounters a problem at school, make a written note about it, listing as many of the facts and circumstances as possible. Take notes when you have meetings with the teacher, nurse or principal. Make all formal requests to the school in

writing. Keep copies of all reports and letters about your child. Make sure all your documents are organized so that you can find them quickly and easily when you need them.

6. Anticipate Objections

You need to be like a good chess player who can anticipate his opponent's moves. Try to think of the problem from the school's perspective. What things do you think they will find objectionable? What reasons might they give to deny your requests?

7. Offer Solutions

After you have thought about what objections the school may have, try to think of solutions that will be mutually agreeable. For example, if the school does not want to have to pay for hand wipes for the children to use after lunch, suggest that the students hand wash in the sink for free. If you cannot think of solutions on your own, ask the school personnel to help you brainstorm. Bringing a prepared form can help. In order to create the form, you have already thought about the best solutions for your child. Having the form prepared ahead of time can also help you to think about what objections the school may raise.

8. Be a Teacher

Approach every interaction as if you were a teacher whose job it is to educate your child's caregivers. Good teachers are patient. You will get better results if you view your role as helping the school to learn about your child and his or her needs than by being a bully who demands your own way.

Continued on next page.

Advocacy at School for Your Food Allergic Child (continued)

I want to make it clear that I am not talking about becoming a lawyer. Lawyers are advocates who receive training and are able to practice law in courtrooms and the like. You can be an advocate for yourself and your child without practicing law. However, do not be afraid to hire a lawyer if the issues get too complicated.

Your role as a parent already qualifies you to be a good advocate. Have confidence in yourself, and you will help your child to get what he needs.

Laurel Francoeur, Esq., is co-leader of the AAFA NE Metro-Northwest Suburban Boston Educational Support Group. She has a child with food allergies, and is co-founder of Greenlaurel Documents, which provides on-line food allergy advocacy tools. This is an excerpt from her book "How to Advocate for Your Food Allergic Child: A Manual for Getting What Your Child Needs at School," which is available for \$9.99 at the "Classroom" section of her website: www.greenlaureldocuments.com.

Resources to help you manage food allergies at school

In addition to the book excerpted above, here are a few other helpful resources on food allergies at school:

PUBLICATIONS

Food Allergies: A Recipe for Success at School A comprehensive 318 pg. book by Jan Hanson. Available on-line and at bookstores. For more info see: www.foodallergyed.com.

The Food Allergy Book: What School Employees Need to Know Published by the National Education Association in English and Spanish. See: <http://neahin.org/educator-resources/foodallergybook.html>

Food Allergies and School: A Guide to Keeping Your Child Safe and Included by Ruth LovettSmith. Available only in e-book format from Amazon.com.

WEBSITES

AllergyHome.org: See "Food Allergy Tools for Schools" at www.AllergyHome.org

Kids with Food Allergies Foundation, a division of AAFA, has a back-to-school tool kit at: <http://community.kidswithfoodallergies.org/blog/managing-food-allergies-essential-back-to-school-tool-kit>.

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