

ASTHMA & ALLERGY BULLETIN

ASTHMA & ALLERGY FOUNDATION OF AMERICA • NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER

FOOD FREE BIRTHDAYS AT SCHOOL? It CAN Be Done!

Celebrating birthdays at school or pre-school should be a treat for everyone, but children with food allergies often feel hurt and left out of the fun. Providing “safe” alternatives to the “goodies” that other children are eating is often not a fair or satisfactory solution, and some parents fear that being singled out while others are enjoying the celebratory foods can harm their child’s self-esteem.

Changing school policies and the “culture” of a school around food issues can be a real challenge. It’s important

that the children with food allergies not be blamed for “spoiling it” for everyone, and that the new policies don’t shift the burden of providing safe foods onto the parents of children with food allergies.

Here’s how one mother successfully worked to eliminate food-centered birthday celebrations, and some ideas for making birthdays at school or child care a special day for every child.

Nursery School Agrees to Include Everyone in Celebrations By Deborah Elbaum

Before my food-allergic son started nursery school, I arranged a meeting with the school’s director to discuss how to reduce the risk of his having an allergic reaction at school. Talking about how to keep him safe, we covered topics such as snack, crafts projects, holiday celebrations and birthday celebrations.

When my older daughter attended the school, I saw firsthand how children’s birthdays were celebrated, with parents bringing in special food treats like elaborate cupcakes or ice cream and sundae toppings. As my son was allergic to dairy, eggs, peanuts, mustard, and sesame, I knew that neither store-bought cupcakes nor ice cream would be safe for him. Anxiously, I asked the director about the possibility of changing the birthday policy so that it would be both safe and inclusive for all of the children.

To my relief, the director supported keeping all nursery school activities safe for everyone. We brainstormed possible solutions that we thought would satisfy the other parents and still make the children feel celebrated. Initially, we decided that the teachers would inform

me of upcoming birthdays, and that I would purchase the birthday snacks and bring them to school. The children could choose either a safe, store-bought vegan cookie or popsicles; most children chose the cookies.

A problem arose when the director, realizing how much more expensive the cookies were, didn’t want to spend hundreds of dollars a year in birthday snacks. So, after a few months, she



decided that popsicles would be served as the birthday treats. This would have been a great solution as the popsicles were popular and relatively inexpensive. Unfortunately, the nursery school didn’t have its own freezer, and when the boxes

of popsicles were stored in the building’s freezer (our nursery school was in a synagogue), they were either thrown out or eaten by other groups.

The following year, unable to think of a safe “special food” that would work (this was about six years ago, before the baking mixes and other food allergy products became widely available) the director boldly decided that for birthdays, no special snack would be served except for the regular daily snack, with the birthday child choosing the type of cracker. In addition, she encouraged the teachers to focus on non-food celebrations.

Did the other parents gladly accept this policy? I tried hard to ignore the grumbling and even harder not to take the negative comments personally. Since I was known as the “allergy parent,” most of the complaining was probably done out of my presence.

(continued on next page)

But none of the parents defied the policy, and the teachers were very good at stating the reasons for the change.

Did the other parents gladly accept this policy? I tried hard to ignore the grumbling and even harder not to take the negative comments personally. Since I was known as the “allergy parent,” most of the complaining was probably done out of my presence. But none of the parents defied the policy, and the teachers were very good at stating the reasons for the change.

So how were the children feted? All of the classes noted the child’s birthday on the whiteboard outside the room, decorated a birthday crown for the child and serenaded the child at snack. In addition, parents were encouraged to visit their child’s classroom to read and/or donate a book to the

class and share in circle time. The teachers brainstormed and implemented other ideas. One class made and gave each child a play-doh birthday cupcake to take home; another class gave the birthday child a small wrapped present at circle time.

Within two years, the school had a new birthday policy that was inclusive. With the support of the school’s director, new ideas were tried, evaluated and modified. Changing that policy was a process, and I learned that sometimes change takes patience and time.

Please share YOUR story. How have you handled “real-life” challenges of living with allergies or asthma? Let us know what happened and how everything worked out.

Ideas for celebrating birthdays without food

The birthday child can:

- Wear a special crown, cape, or button
- Receive a small gift or certificate from the class or school
- Bring in a T-shirt or something else for classmates to sign
- Have a special privilege or job (be the “leader”) for the day
- Be allowed to skip a homework or class assignment
- Give out small favors (pencils, stickers) to classmates
- Choose a book to donate to the class or school library
- Make the school’s morning announcements or lead the Pledge of Allegiance
- Share something special or show something special about him/herself; be the “star of the day”

The class can:

- Sing “Happy Birthday”
- Decorate a big birthday card or poster
- Make a “birthday book” in which the kids write (or dictate) kind compliments about the birthday child or contribute drawings
- Have a party involving crafts, movies or music

The school can:

- Announce birthdays over the PA system, at school meetings, or in the cafeteria

© Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, New England Chapter

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION of:



Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America®
NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER

109 Highland Ave.
Needham, MA 02494
Tel: 781-444-7778
E-mail: aafane@aafane.org

www.asthmaandallergies.org

BECOME A MEMBER OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP NOW!

Membership in AAFA New England helps you and others with asthma and allergies to enjoy fuller lives.

MEMBERSHIP

- Patron \$500
- Sustaining \$50
- Benefactor \$250
- Single/Family \$25
- Sponsor or Professional \$100
- Renewal
- New Member

MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES

- ◆ Newsletters mailed to you (bulk copies to Professional members)
- ◆ Personalized resources and information
- ◆ Notice of educational programs and special events
- ◆ 10% discount on books

Make check payable to AAFA New England Chapter and mail to 109 Highland Ave., Needham, MA 02494. *MC/VISA accepted by phone or mail.*

NAME _____

STREET _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

PHONE _____ E-Mail _____

MC/VISA # _____ Exp. Date _____

Please remember to ask your company for a matching contribution to AAFA NE