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# ASTHMA & ALLERGY BULLETIN

ASTHMA AND ALLERGY FOUNDATION OF AMERICA • NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER

## SHARE YOUR STORY: Starting Kindergarten with Food Allergies Personal Picture Book Paves the Way to Understanding

By Carla Uzzell

In 2008 when my 17 month old daughter went into anaphylactic shock after putting a cashew in her mouth, the worries of Kindergarten were very far from my



mind. Instead, I focused on the day to day toddler playgroups, birthday parties and the relatives that just didn't understand how serious potentially life-threatening food allergies truly are.

For all of these hurdles, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, New England Chapter guided me through. Shortly after Jessica's life threatening reaction, I started attending every single support group event that was held within a 45 mile radius that AAFA New England offered. From the experts: allergists and parents in attendance, I learned how to read labels carefully, how to educate family members who were still in denial, and in case of an emergency I practiced administering expired epinephrine injectors in every orange the guest speakers passed to me.

Fast forward 3 years from that fateful night when my baby was at death's door due to a food that I have always enjoyed. Kindergarten was on the horizon. By this time, I felt comfortable with our day to day life. Our family of four had our routines down at the few safe restaurants that we braved attending. During the few hours I did work each week our sitter was well trained with how to keep Jessica safe and how to use an epinephrine injector in the confines of our home. Jessica was now nearly 5 years old and very good at hand washing before eating and saying "No thank you, I have food allergies" if offered a lollipop at the post office or a piece of cake at a birthday party.

Still, with Kindergarten looming, I was counting the hours each day that my daughter would be without my careful eye noticing which kid was eating nuts, who

hadn't washed their hands well, and which adults need to be informed of my precious daughter's potentially life threatening food allergies. Full day Kindergarten equals 6.5 hours per day. This seemed like way too many opportunities for mess ups.

Then I remembered something I had heard at one of the many, many AAFA New England meetings I had attended. A mom of a school age boy told us that she had made a book specific to her son's allergies. She then asked the school nurse and the classroom teacher to read this book to the boy's classmates so they could all be well versed in their classmate's allergies and how to keep him safe. I remembered thinking this was a brilliant idea, but it was so many meetings ago that I had tucked the idea away.

Armed with this great idea and just weeks before the start of school, I got busy scripting each page and making notes of the images I thought the 5 year olds should see. I wanted to include images of my daughter's allergens; peanuts, tree nuts and sesame so every classmate would know what to keep away from Jessica. I wanted the children to know how to clean their hands; soap works but hand sanitizer does not, if they have eaten Jessica's allergens. I also wanted her peers to know that Jessica has many interests and hobbies that have nothing to do with allergies. She is a fun, kind, playful child who happens to also have allergies to some very common foods. This part was important to include because although I wanted to educate her peers, I did not want them to be afraid to befriend this classmate.

With each page scripted, I decided what picture would best illustrate the important written message. Then 5 year old Jessica and her 4 year old sister were excited to participate in the photo shoots! I got advice from other moms of soon to be Kindergarteners about if the information was clear and if there was anything else they wondered.

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# Personal Picture Book Paves the Way to Understanding

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Size was important; I didn't want the book to be too long, in case the classmates lost interest. Also I did not want the book to be too small so that the photos would be clear. I opted for 12x12 so that every peanut, tree nut and sesame seed was very visible on the page. After all of the edits and revisions, it was time to make the book in its final form.

When we met Jessica's Kindergarten teacher and school nurse in August of 2011, just days before the first day of school, I brought along the book I had made. I kindly asked if they would read this book to the class on the first day of school. They were very impressed with the compilation of information in a kid-friendly manner and agreed to read the book to Jessica's class on the first day of school and the other Kindergarten classes in the first



week of school, so all of the students in her grade would be able to work together to keep their classmate safe.

Food allergies stormed into my life the day my baby girl fought to breathe with little to no relief. This we have no choice about. My life's goal has been to live being prepared, not paranoid. Sometimes, I know there is a fine line between the two when it comes to keeping those we love safe. This tidbit about creating a food allergy book specific to my child to be shared with her peers that I gathered at an AAFA New England meeting years ago helped me be prepared, not paranoid.

The same book I created was read again in Jessica's first grade class. Today, Jessica is gearing up for second grade. Her love of learning is awe inspiring. She is a wonderfully artistic, opinionated, clever little girl who has her whole life ahead of her. I wonder if she'll allow me to share this book with her second grade teacher.... Time will tell.

**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.**  
(Send to: [sharons@aafane.org](mailto:sharons@aafane.org) or call 781-444-7778.)

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