

# **Tips from the Trenches – Manz Elementary School**

## **Topic: Allergies at School**

We know that families are often searching for tips/ideas about how to handle things at home or school. We plan to send out some “tips” written by our very own Manz staff members to provide families with some helpful information. This tip is about how to respond to allergy issues at school. **Thank you to Mr. Winters, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, for sharing his personal story with all of us!**

Si usted quiere ayuda en interpretar esta carta, por favor póngase en contacto con el asistente de educación bilingüe al 715-852-3962 y deje un mensaje con su nombre y número de teléfono.

Yog koj xav tau kev pab kom koj nkag siab tsab ntawv nov zoo, hais ua lus Hmoob. Thov hu xov tooj rau koj tus menyuam lub tsev kawm ntawv yog 715-852-3962. Hais lus tseg, hais koj lub npe thiab muab koj tus xov tooj tseg. Peb ib tug neeg txhais lus mam li hu qhia rau koj kom koj nkag siab zoo tshaj qhov nov ntxiv.

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It’s almost inevitable. Your child starts the school year in a new classroom when that dreaded note comes home.

**This is a peanut free classroom. Please refrain from sending snacks and treats that contain peanuts, peanut butter, nut products, or any snacks that may have been processed in a facility where peanuts may have been present.**

And as a parent, it’s possible you might think, “How am I supposed to do that?!? Nearly everything has nut products in it! I’m supposed to totally change what my child brings to school for morning snack or their birthday treat just because ONE kid has a peanut allergy? Seriously, ONE?? That’s so inconvenient! When I was a kid, nobody EVER had peanut allergies!”

I won’t lie...I’m a teacher, and at one point in my teaching career, I thought exactly the same thing.

In the fall of 2008, I was informed I’d have a student in my classroom with a severe peanut allergy, the first time I ever had a student with such an allergy. And when I was told exactly what precautions would need to be taken, I nearly lost it. I’d have to actually LEAVE my classroom if I wanted to eat my peanut butter protein bars? All because of ONE student? Other kids couldn’t bring in snacks or treats containing peanuts or peanut butter?

Yep, that's exactly what that meant.

I never voiced a complaint because for the most part I’m a rule follower, but eleven years later, if I could go back and erase any negative thoughts I had about these circumstances, I would. I had no idea how much I didn’t understand about this.

It's only fitting that my daughter, Kennedy, who was born 4 years after that, was diagnosed with a severe peanut allergy shortly after her first birthday. It was only a spoonful of my Reese's Pieces ice cream that I shared with her...only a spoonful. I remember pulling her out of her crib while she was sobbing during a nap. I remember placing her in the tub to clean her off because she had thrown up everywhere. I remember being scared to death when I noticed her body and face were puffed up and rash covered while she started breathing funny. I remember the four hours I spent in the emergency room holding my little girl while she continued to sob and throw up as the doctors poked and prodded her looking for answers. And I definitely remember when the doctor informed me it was a good thing I brought her in when I did.

There's no question the number of food allergies in our school community has increased in the last several years. According to [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org), more than 15% of school-aged children with food allergies have had an allergic reaction at school. These reactions range from mild to severe and even fatal. There's a reason we have a "peanut free" table in our cafeteria. There's a reason why all students are expected to thoroughly wash their hands after eating their morning snack or lunch.

We all want the best for our children. We want them to be happy. A classroom birthday treat should be a special event. Of course, a mid-morning snack should be enjoyed. But if for just a moment we could all envision that one child in the class who is repeatedly told, "Sorry, you can't have the birthday treat that was brought in today because it might make you sick." Imagine if that were YOUR child. Would you want them to be singled out that way? Wouldn't you want their experience to be as "normal" as anybody else?

Now that my daughter is in kindergarten, I send a box of safe snacks to her class just in case what is served on treat days is something unsafe for her to eat. While I feel better knowing she'll be safe, I'd be lying if I said I enjoyed having to do that.

As parents, we're often rushed, and we don't always think about what's best for EVERYBODY, especially when it comes to our own children's special days. And while kids today have become much better at advocating for themselves with regards to their allergies, it's important to remember, they are still just kids. The school's main responsibility is their safety and well-being.

So, I'd like to encourage you to always be aware of the foods you're sending to school with your child. I encourage you to take the time to read the allergy warnings on the labels of packages and not just assume because the product doesn't contain peanuts, that it is completely safe. I encourage you to touch base with your child's teacher if you are unaware of any food allergies in the classroom. Begin looking for snacks and treats that are classroom safe for all students. Surely, you'll find at least one that your child will enjoy. If you're unaware of them, one quick, "Peanut Free Snacks" internet search would yield thousands of results.

Take it from me, as someone who once was reluctant to make changes in my own food habits, a little extra care and responsibility on all of our parts will go a long way in ensuring our allergy population, not to mention our entire student body, continues to feel a sense of belonging and safety here at Manz School.

**Mr. Winters, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, [swinters@ecasd.us](mailto:swinters@ecasd.us)**