

Birthday Fun for Food Allergic Kids

By Tracy, Boston Mamas Guest Contributor

My older son has been to many birthday parties, and has enjoyed himself immensely. As far as I can tell, he has never felt left out because of his food allergies (milk and milk products, eggs, peanuts), and I think the collaboration I engage in with hosting parents helps a lot. There certainly has been a learning curve, though, in figuring out how my son can safely enjoy partying at a friend's house; the following are some tips that might help parents of allergic kids, and parents hosting parties where allergic kids will be attending.

Tips for Parents:

1. Go with your child to the party! Offer to help the hosts (I find these offers are rarely refused, especially at bowling parties), or offer to fade into the background only to surface at cake time.
2. Bring a bag with your Epi-pens or other allergy meds (puffers, Benadryl), clearly labelled, and, if leaving your child (generally not recommended unless they are older than about 9) ensure that the host parents know where this is.
3. It is a really good idea to have your child wear a medical I.D. bracelet (not necklet). If an emergency does occur, the information on this bracelet can assist first responders in administering the proper treatment to your child.
4. Talk with your child about allergy management at parties, and encourage him or her to tell his/her friends about it. We have had great success both in the day care and school settings with letting our son tell his story, and having his teachers and parents educate his friends and their parents about our daily lives. My older son's friends take their role in his safety very seriously, and often know more about food allergies by the age of 4 than most adults do in a lifetime.

Tips for Hosts:

1. If a parent informs you that their child has a food allergy, ask how you can help. Try to be as accommodating as possible; parents of food allergic kids especially appreciate it. **Do** invite the parent to stay with their child. Most parents of food allergic children are trying to keep some sense of normalcy for their child. Follow their lead, and the kids can still have a great time.
2. *Food/cake:* Most parents I have worked with on party stuff have been extremely relieved when I suggest that I will bring appropriate substitute foods for my son. I do this for a couple of reasons. First, I don't believe providing a list of foods that are "safe" for him actually is *safe*. Label reading is a challenging thing at the best of times, and ingredients change often, so that one week something is safe and the next it is not. In addition, there are so many additives, preservatives, etc. that are "hidden" ingredients that I feel it's too risky. Second, it helps with my son's level of anxiety, too. One of our rules is that he can't eat food that wasn't brought from home. This way, we get to hold fast to that rule, he doesn't get confused, or worry that maybe he shouldn't eat this or that. Third, baking a cake is confusing when making substitutions for the first time. "Egg substitute" means too many different things depending on what the products are marketed as. And, no one

wants to buy a whole box of the leavening substitute that I use for a cake they are baking once a year. So instead of asking a hosting parent to deal with all of that, I usually try to get an idea of what the cake will look like, and then decorate one or two cupcakes to match (if only by icing color).

3. *Birthdays hosted in restaurants, or where the party package has food included:* Please inquire for the parent whether they will be allowed to bring outside food onto the premises. Some party places (e.g., playing gyms, etc.) have a rule about this to prevent things like peanut butter from being onsite, so that they don't increase the risk of accidental exposure for peanut allergic kids. Restaurants are sometimes hesitant to allow outside food because that means one less person eating their food, thus reducing their revenue. That said, we have not yet been refused entry because we are bringing in allergy friendly food.
4. *Activities (or the Dreaded Piñata):* Besides the increased risk of injury piñatas brings to a party, they are the absolute antithesis of fun for a food allergic kid and their parent. On more than one occasion, I have watched my older son whack his heart out, only to have to stand by and watch while his fellow party pals scramble for a share of the booty. Most piñata filling kits have candy and chocolate in them, and most don't have ingredients listed on them. If you can't find a kit that only contains small toys, and no candy, my suggestion would be to skip it if you know there is a food allergic kid coming. Fall back on other traditional party games, that kids find just as fun (pin the tail on the donkey, hot potato, musical chairs, 3-legged races, drop the penny, etc.)

Parents of food allergic kids should realize that most parents hosting parties are actually nervous about what might happen to the food allergic child at the party. The more you can do to alleviate this concern, the more successful the party will be for both of you, and the more likely it is that your child will be invited back.

Parents hosting the party should realize that it is extremely anxiety inducing for parents to send their child to a house they may not be very familiar with, with people in attendance who might not know about the allergy, or might not understand it. Working together can make birthday parties fun for all the kids (as they should be), and less worry than they already are for the parents.