

## **The Kids are Back in School - Tips for Making the (Gluten-Free) Grade** **by Danna Korn**

If you have a lot of tension and you get a headache, do what it says on the aspirin bottle: "Take two aspirin" and "Keep away from children."

The transition from summer to back-to-school is paradoxical. On one hand, summer means sleeping in, adventuresome vacations, evenings free of homework and obligatory assignments, and a chance for parents to take pleasure in their kids' carefree, relaxed summer schedule (or lack thereof). On the other hand, mantras like, "I'm bored," "Are we there yet?" "There's nothing to do here," and the non-stop sibling bickering that seems to escalate when one child dares to breathe the same air as another has some parents singing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year" a good four months before Christmas.

But it's not always the most wonderful time of the year. For parents whose children can't eat gluten, sending kids to school can create an entirely new dimension of anxiety that extend far beyond the typical back-to-school blues: What will he eat for lunch? What if there are birthday parties and my child can't participate? Will kids make fun of him? Will the teacher take time to understand his condition? What if he eats the Play Doh? How can I make this easier for him?

### **This is harder on you than it is on your child**

If your child is newly diagnosed with celiac disease, or is new to the gluten-free diet, I know you're thinking, "Oh, no it's not! She just doesn't understand how hard this is." When I speak at conferences and tell parents this is harder on them than it is on their kids, I inevitably have one or two - always the parents of newly diagnosed celiac kids - who "respectfully" (and usually temperamentally) disagree. They tell me I don't understand.

Believe me, I do understand. But also believe me that this is harder on you than it is your child. It's harder, because of the very nature of being a parent. We love our kids so intensely that every pain they experience hurts us ten times more. Nothing breaks our hearts more than to know that our children may experience heartache. But remember, one of our most important jobs as parents is to teach our children how to deal with unpleasant experiences and emotions. As Anne Bronte said, "If you would have your son to walk honorably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them."

### **Tips to make it easier**

\* Give your child control of his diet.

Yep, even if he's just two years old. Anyone who has heard me speak or has read either of my books knows that I'm an absolute nag about telling you to give your child control of his diet, because if he doesn't control his diet, his diet will control him.

- **Educate your teachers and principal.**

Set a meeting with your child's teacher(s) and principal to explain your child's condition and diet. The best time to do this is a day or two before school starts for the year. The teachers are usually at school setting up their classrooms, but they're not yet distracted with new students, parents, and classroom responsibilities. Provide the teachers, principal, and the school nurse, if you have one, with clear, concise written materials explaining celiac disease and your child's diet. Some people find it helpful to give the book *Kids with Celiac Disease* to the school, so that the nurse, teachers, and principal can more thoroughly understand the condition and diet. Make sure they understand the severity of accidental gluten ingestion. Remind them that they should contact you if there are any questions, rather than taking a chance.

- **Lunches: use good judgment.**

Most of the time, the people in charge of preparing food for children in a preschool or school setting are already used to dealing with lactose intolerance, peanut allergies, and other dietary restrictions. Talk to the dietitian or person in charge of food preparation. Go over the menu plans, discuss the foods your child can and can't have, and talk about the importance of using clean utensils to avoid cross-contamination. If you feel comfortable with the person's understanding and acceptance of the diet, give them the opportunity to accommodate your child's special diet. You always have the option of sending in your own meals if you think it's not working out. If you are interested in your child's legal rights to reduced-cost school lunches, see *Kids with Celiac Disease* under "Section 504."

- \* **Talk to the adult lunchtime supervisors.**

Kids will swap food. It's an age-old tradition, and it's not likely to stop with your child. Aside from the likelihood of getting gluten, your child may end up hungry. Sometimes your child's goodies are "better" than the other child's, and it makes your child so proud that she'll gladly give them all away, to be left with nothing. So the best you can do is explain to your child why she can't trade food with her buddies, and make sure the lunch area monitors are keeping an eye out for swappers.

- \* Out of snack and lunch ideas? See *Kids with Celiac Disease*.

It's loaded with snack and menu ideas, many of which travel well in lunch boxes and bags.

- \* **Give the teacher a stash of gluten-free treats.**

A large bag of Halloween-sized individually wrapped candies works well, and because they're individually wrapped, the teacher can keep them in a cupboard without the threat of ant invasions. Let the teacher know that these treats are to be used any time there is a special event during which treats will be served. Make sure the treats are your child's favorite; you don't want him feeling like he's being short-changed.

- \* **Get a schedule of classmates' birthdays and scheduled holiday parties.**

Teachers are glad to provide you with a listing of everyone's birthdays. This way you know in advance when there will be parties. You can coordinate with the other child's parent, or send your child in with her own cupcake or treat. If there's a surprise event, your child always has the stash of candy you've given the teacher.

- \***On your child's birthday, bring a popular gluten-free treat for the entire class.**

It's best not to risk celebrating your child's birthday with gluten-free cupcakes. It's possible that everyone in your child's class might like your homemade gluten-free cupcakes. On the other hand, there may be one kid who, for whatever reason, takes one bite and spits it across the classroom, declaring, "What IS this stuff?" You can bet your child won't forget that incident for a very long time. It's best not to risk it. Instead, bring in ice cream bars or ice cream sundaes. Or, if you can't do frozen foods, bring cutely decorated candy bars or goodie bags filled with candy (brands that everyone knows). It will bring your child immense pleasure to share treats with the class that she can eat too (and kids like that stuff better than cupcakes anyway!). Of course, you will want to be sensitive to any of your child's classmates who might have peanut or other allergies, and choose treats that everyone in the class can enjoy.

**\* Ask for liberal restroom privileges.**

Many teachers restrict the number of times children are allowed to go to the restroom, or they ask children to wait until a more appropriate, less disruptive time. Let the teacher know that your child's condition may require a hasty trip to the restroom, and that he should under no circumstances be restricted from going. You may even want to establish a little "code" between your child and her teacher, so that he can inconspicuously dismiss himself. It's a little less embarrassing than having to ask.

**\* Consider talking to the parents at the parents-only back-to-school night.**

Most schools have a back-to-school night for parents only. This is a great time to talk to the other parents about your child's condition and diet. Not only will you be helping them to understand and accommodate your child's diet, but you will be educating dozens more people about celiac disease - something we should all be doing on a regular basis.

**Don't be mad when people don't accommodate your child's diet.**

It's going to happen. Someone will have surprise treats for the class that your child can't eat, and the teacher's "secret stash" will be empty. Or someone will decide it's "baking day," and your child will be the only one not sampling the goods. Don't be annoyed, offended, or angry. These people aren't intentionally trying to leave your child out, nor are they being insensitive. They simply forget sometimes!

Most importantly, remember that your child is learning from your reactions. He will be in situations like this for the rest of his life - teach him to be gracious, politely declining the treats offered to him, and to accept the fact that this is just one of those little stones in his path of life that he'll need to learn to step over...with a smile and the knowledge that people generally mean well.