

Early Grade School (5–8 years)

The Food Allergy Stages handouts were designed to help families manage food allergies at different developmental stages.

- Use the *Food Allergy Basics for All Ages* handout to learn about important information all parents should know when they have a child with food allergies.
- Always speak with your child's allergist if you have questions or before making changes to your child's food allergy management plan.



School-aged children can understand more about food allergies and follow simple safety rules. This is a good age to involve your child in food allergy management with your supervision. Involving children helps to build their skills and confidence.

Teaching Children about Food Allergy

- Teach your child about food allergies in the same way you talk about other safety issues, like looking both ways before crossing the street. “Eggs can make you sick. We read labels and keep your medicine with us because these strategies work really well to keep you safe.”
- Avoid scary words such as “life-threatening allergies.”
- Teach children the names of their food allergens. You can teach them what the foods look like using photos, pictures, or during trips to the grocery store.

Allergen Exposure

- Reinforce hand washing before eating and how long to wash (e.g., sing the ABCs twice).
- Teach your child that just being near or smelling an allergen does not cause a reaction. If allergen gets on their skin, they should wash it off. Skin keeps allergens out of the body!

Label Reading

- Teach your child why reading ingredient labels is important. “We can't tell what is in a food just by looking at it. The label tells us all of the ingredients in the food.”
- Consider using sight word cards with allergen names and pictures to help your child learn the spelling of their allergens.
- As your child learns to read, let them practice label reading with you at home and at the store. Show them the name and spellings of their allergens. Consider cutting out labels of different foods and sorting them into piles of safe and unsafe foods with your child.
- Be consistent with family rules. “If there is no label, we can't eat the food.”

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Recognizing and Treating an Allergic Reaction

- Teach your child about symptoms of an allergic reaction and to tell an adult if they feel sick or think they ate a food to which they are allergic.
- Explain why you keep the epinephrine auto-injector close by at all times. “If you have a reaction, it will help you feel better quickly.”
- Help your child practice with an auto-injector training device (e.g., on themselves, you, a doll) to feel more comfortable. Make sure your child understands not to play with their actual epinephrine auto-injector. Tell them a grown-up would give the medicine for a real reaction.



Managing Food Allergies at Home

- Start to involve your child in cooking, so they can learn about preparing safe meals.
- Create a space for safe, ready-to-serve snacks. Consider using simple labels your child can understand, such as green light stickers or the word “safe.”
- Talk about routines you follow before you leave the house. “Let’s use the bathroom, grab your coat, and make sure we have your epinephrine auto-injector.”

Eating Out at Restaurants

- Include your child in communication at restaurants. “I have food allergies to wheat and soy.” You can practice language ahead of time through play or role-plays.



Managing Food Allergies at Childcare/School

- If there is an allergen-free table in the lunchroom, find out how children with food allergies are socially included (e.g., choosing a friend with a safe lunch to join them).
- Talk with your child about routines they will follow at school (e.g., washing hands before and after eating, no sharing food, telling an adult if they need help or think they may be having a reaction).
- Find out how classmates will learn about food allergies (e.g., lesson from the nurse or teacher, children’s book or video). When peers understand, they want to be helpers.
- Practice how your child would tell the teacher if they feel sick or think they may be having an allergic reaction.

Navigating Social Activities

- Take things in steps. Get to know parents of your child’s friends by hosting play dates or staying at others’ homes. This gives you a chance to educate about your child’s allergies.
- Keep a supply of safe treats to have available for birthday parties and celebrations.
- Talk with your child ahead of time about what they can and cannot eat at social events. Involve them in choosing a safe treat to bring along.
- At the event, introduce your child to the adult they can talk to if they need help.
- Teach your child to only take food from approved adults. Role-play what to say if offered food. “No thank you, I have food allergies,” or “I have to ask my parent.”
- Consider having your child wear a medical identification bracelet. Ask your child what kind of bracelet they want. At this age they may prefer a more traditional metal bracelet rather than a colorful plastic one.

Supporting Your Child's Self-Esteem

- Your child may sometimes feel frustrated or sad when they cannot eat a food, or have to do things differently from other children. Let them know it's okay to have these feelings.
- Encourage your child to come to you if they are feeling upset. Listen first. Even if you can't "fix" the situation, it is important for your child to know that you understand.
- Praise your child for making good choices. "I know it was hard when you couldn't eat the snack at soccer. I was proud when you said 'no thank you.' Let's get a safe treat now."
- Practice language for common situations so your child will feel more confident (e.g., how to explain to curious friends why they are not eating the cake at the birthday party).
- Check in with your child about any teasing or bullying about food allergies. If there are concerns, talk to the school/adults in charge. Bullying should never be ignored.



Managing Your Child's Anxiety and Feeling Confident

- Your child may sometimes have "what if" questions about allergies or feel nervous about eating in some situations. Encourage them to come to you with questions or worries.
- Involve your child in coming up with coping thoughts and plans, based on what they know about managing food allergies. "I will only be eating food that's safe for me."
- After an allergic reaction, help your child return to normal food allergy management routines. You can help them feel in control by talking about how the emergency plan worked well. "You did the right thing when you told me your throat felt tight," or "We used your auto-injector and you felt better quickly". This can also be an opportunity to talk about anything you will do differently to stay safe in the future.
- Talk with your child's allergist or primary care provider if your child is worrying about food allergies, or if they start to avoid safe foods or situations where food is present. Mental health professionals can help families cope with anxiety related to a child's medical condition.

Preparing Children for Medical Visits

- Talk to your child about medical visits about 1-3 days ahead of time.
- Provide information about what to expect. "The skin test may feel itchy for a little while. We'll bring a video game or crayons to keep busy so it doesn't bother you."
- For procedures like blood testing, offer your child coping strategies such as distraction (e.g., watching a video, counting backwards) or a relaxation technique such as deep breathing.
- At this stage, some children will want to participate in their medical visits. Encourage your child to be involved in the appointment if they want to be, such as asking their own questions about their food allergy, talking with their allergist about how to avoid allergens and how their Anaphylaxis Action Plan works, and helping you practice with an epinephrine auto-injector training device. If your child is nervous, plan for a small reward immediately after the visit.
- After the appointment, praise your child for their participation. Encourage them to share their feelings and review what they learned for the next appointment.

See the Food Allergy Stages *Late Grade School* handout for questions about managing food allergies as your child gets older.