

What is Food Allergy Bullying?

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BULLYING /boolē-ēng/ verb. Unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Includes making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.

Types of Food Allergy Bullying:

Verbal and physical bullying

Cyberbullying

Peer-to-peer bullying

Teacher-to-student

- Bullying is more than just teasing among children.
- The difference is the power imbalance (real or perceived) and the intention to cause harm.
- For children with food allergies, the power imbalance can be quite real – and the harm potentially life-threatening.
- Although most bullying reported by children happens at school, it also occurs other places children are together, including playgrounds, school buses, at home or in a friend's home, restaurants, camp, and on the Internet.
- In some cases, the school bully is not a student but a teacher or other adult.
- Bullying a child with a food allergy can range from taunting the child to physically assaulting with the allergen. It is considered a form of "disability harassment". In a Dear Colleague Letter issued 7/25/00, OCR clearly states, "Disability harassment is a form of discrimination prohibited by Section 504 and Title II."

What Can Food Allergy Bullying Look Like?

- Unexplained injuries.
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry.
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick, or faking illness.
- Changes in eating habits, such as suddenly skipping meals or binge eating. Kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch.
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares.
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school.
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations.
- Feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem.
- Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide.
- Avoiding certain areas. For example, a student may avoid eating in certain areas of the school cafeteria; avoid eating at certain times, or not eating at all during school.
- Lunchbox repeatedly coming home full, indicating possible food avoidance.
- Changes in behavior, such as risky eating behaviors by a child who was once a careful label reader.