

# • debate •

## Should Schools Be Nut-Free Zones?

### yes

BY HEATHER HEWETT

**KIDS SHOULD** learn to live in the world.

I begin with this statement because it informs my parenting. I've also heard it used when people reject the idea that schools should ban peanuts or tree nuts. After all, we don't live in a world where we can simply ban peanuts, do we?

No, we don't. The world contains plenty of nuts (of the food variety), and it's my job as a parent to help my daughter, who has multiple life-threatening food allergies, to learn to navigate the world safely. But it's also my job to make sure that she stays safe and that she's able to learn at elementary school, just like any other kid. If that means a school-wide nut ban, for her or for any other student, I support it.

In the U.S., peanuts and tree nuts cause the majority of food-related deaths. They can trigger severe reactions in just trace amounts, even when previous reactions have been mild. For this reason, doctors tend to prescribe epinephrine for these particular allergies. There appears to be an increase in the prevalence of nut allergies among children; one study showed that reported peanut allergy in children increased threefold in the decade leading up to 2008. And, of course, peanut butter is ubiquitous at school cafeterias and in lunch boxes. Is it any wonder that some schools have decided to implement nut bans?

Bans can prove particularly helpful during the early years of school. Many small children literally don't know how to keep their hands to themselves; they're still learning basic concepts such as *personal space* and *self-control*. (Largely in response to my son, our preschool instilled the No Kissing rule.) Young kids coping with food allergies vary widely when it comes to how well they understand their own condition, never mind what a peanut or a walnut actually looks like. In large classrooms, teachers must make sure that *everyone's* hands are properly washed *after* every snack—a challenging responsibility under the best of circumstances. And peanut butter, as we all know, is a sticky affair.

I can't help but wonder, for example, whether a nut ban might have helped prevent seven-year-old Ammaria Johnson's death in January of this year. Ammaria died at a Virginia school when a classmate gave her a peanut on the playground. From what I could tell from the news reports, a lot of things went wrong that day. The biggest failure? Her school clinic didn't give her epinephrine. This, more than anything else, would have saved her life. But might a school ban have helped prevent this tragedy?

Bans aren't failsafe—among other things, they're tricky to enforce—but they



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## YES CONTINUED

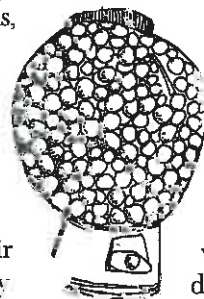
can help send some important messages. Food allergies are serious. It takes a village. We should all pay attention. School should be safe for everyone. Used in conjunction with other approaches—washing hands, stocking non-student-specific epinephrine, and training school staff to recognize and treat allergic reactions—bans provide an important tool for schools working to create a safe learning environment for all kids.

No one yet understands the reasons, but rates of food allergy among children appear to be rising. Among the under-eighteen crowd, studies have shown that two out of every twenty-five kids have food allergies; in many schools, that's two students in every classroom. These statistics baffle me as much as anyone. But until medical research figures this out, we have to adapt—and this means acknowledging that our educational institutions have to change, too.

We need schools to develop flexible and responsive policies in collaboration with parents and with careful attention to student needs. Some schools

have adopted nut-free zones or nut-free classrooms, while others have designated special “nut tables” in the cafeteria while all other school spaces remain nut-free. At these schools, the cafeteria does not sell any items containing peanuts or nuts, but students who bring in nuts (or products that might contain nuts) sit at the nut table during lunch. As a result, all students learn how to analyze their food and read labels on a daily basis—an educational lesson that truly advances awareness about food allergies.

What's most important, in my opinion, is that schools take on a leadership role. As a parent, I play a more limited, albeit important, part. My job includes communicating with the school nurse, the teachers, and the principal the important details of my daughter's health, including which medications to use when; as she matures, she can increasingly participate in this process. But when she's at school, it's their job to keep her safe.



Last year, when a mother at my son's preschool asked the other parents to send in peanut-free lunches, we agreed.

As a friend, I supported her. As a mother, I confess, I found the prospect inconvenient. Peanut butter was so cheap! So nutritious! I had been reveling in the newly discovered ease of fixing PB&J sandwiches, something that was never an option for my daughter. Now I had to give it up and find other lunch foods for a picky four-year-old.

But I didn't agonize for long. I was more than willing to trade convenience for safety. I explained the situation to my son: His friend needed his help to stay safe. Just like his sister. He could still eat jelly sandwiches, only without peanut butter. And he was okay with that.

I realized then that he was learning a valuable lesson: how to live in a community where everyone matters, including kids with food allergies. Isn't that the world we're all living in? •



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