

## RECIPE FOR SAFETY

Farmington Hills mom writes book for preschoolers with food allergies

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Tracie Schrand had a perfectly normal household in Farmington Hills until the day she fed her youngest child some peanut butter.

The 34-year-old mother of three noticed a small lump rising above the lip of Melissa, then 15 months old.

"She was acting fine. But I thought, 'Hmm, sensitive skin,' " said her mother.

A few months later, on the advice of a pediatrician, Melissa was tested for an allergy to peanuts. Within seconds, Melissa began sliding into a potentially life-threatening reaction, one so powerful that allergy specialists quickly stopped the test.

That's when everything at the Schrand house changed, including holidays. Especially holidays.

"I try to do holidays here so I control the food. Nothing comes in the house that has nuts in it," Schrand said on Nov. 15 as she prepared to host Thanksgiving dinner this week.

But she's worried about having Christmas in Armada with her husband's family.

"You just have more bodies to control when you have 30 people. You can't have peanut butter around for a couple days before, when Melissa's going to be there, because she touches things and then touches her mouth.

"If she were 12, you could tell her, 'Wash your hands. Don't put your cookie down without a plate.' But she just turned 3. Those types of social gatherings may make people think, 'What's wrong with them? Don't they want to be friends anymore?' "

Even a person breathing on Melissa after eating peanuts could trigger a life-threatening reaction, her mother said.

Their worries have put a distance between the Schrands and those they'd like to befriend. Yet, they've also inspired family members to do all they can to safeguard Melissa while educating others.

Schrand has written, illustrated and self-published a 26-page book, called "A Day at the Playground" (\$12.95), for parents to read to preschoolers with food allergies. She markets removable stickers, a teddy bear, a lanyard and a bottle for water, each imprinted with the words "Ask Before You Share."

With help from her oldest child's software smarts, she also launched a Web site about food allergies -- <http://www.allergyavenue.com/>.

Keeping a nut-free household while promoting the products has become Schrand's full-time job. Still, it's often a lonely battle to keep Melissa safe.

"If you invite guests over and they bring something, you're always sorry because you have to say, 'We can't have that in the house.' And the people say, 'Well, it doesn't have peanuts in it.'

"And we say, 'Sorry, we'd have to see the label.' It may have gone down the same line with peanuts" in a food-processing factory, said Schrand. Because most chocolate products are made in factories with nut fragments flying about, even chocolate is verboten at the Schrand house.

Protecting their youngest has become a powerful family value, shared by her husband, Vince Schrand, and their two other daughters -- Sidney, 8, and Laurie, 18. All have banned from their diets not only peanuts but all nuts, to avoid confusing their most vulnerable family member.

Outside the home, the family is learning who's an ally, and who isn't. They don't buy ice-cream cones at outlets that won't guarantee their products to be nut-free.

"But at Cold Stone Creamery, they go to the back room and take out a fresh batch of ice cream, so we know that nobody has touched it with peanuts," said Tracie Schrand, adding that "Bakeries are *not* OK, most of the time."

Vince Schrand, a mechanical engineer with DaimlerChrysler in Detroit, said the family's focus might have a happy ending.

The home business is "certainly not in the black yet" and may never be, he said.

But by keeping Melissa free of allergic reactions, her sensitivity to peanuts is expected to shrink. Already, there are signs of that: In a one-year follow-up test, Melissa showed far less sensitivity to the peanut allergen. Many children outgrow food allergies, especially if protected from reactions in their early years, experts say.

"We're concerned that if we don't take the precautions now, she'll have to endure this the rest of her life," he said.

The family is finding others, too, who share their challenge -- like Crystal Callander, 33, also of Farmington Hills.

Her 6-year-old daughter, Caroline, has an allergy not to peanuts but to other types of nuts, commonly called tree nuts.

"She was 3 when a relative gave her one cashew and she had to go to the hospital," Caroline's mother said.

Like the Schrands, the Callanders strive to hold holiday feasts at home, where they can control the food.

Still, both families have the same strategy: no nuts of any kind, to keep from confusing their own youngsters, as well as friends and relatives.

It's not easy keeping a scary food entirely away from a child, a family, a household, a neighborhood, a Sunday school, a preschool -- and on and on. Too often, there are too few who sympathize, said Crystal Callander.

"When you're the parent of an allergic child, you have to turn over all the stones yourself," she said.

"The main thing I would say to anyone is, 'Just take us seriously. Don't kill my child.' "

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