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# WELCOME

## To The World of Food Allergies & Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook Sherri A. Svrcek, MA

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ISBN-13: 978-1494878153 ISBN-10: 1494878151

CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, North Charleston, SC

To my son Connor and husband Frank: for you...anything. TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE Welcome

*Welcome those big, sticky, complicated problems. In them are your most powerful opportunities.*  
-Ralph Marston

I would like to take this opportunity to personally welcome you to the world of food allergies and intolerances. This world is probably not one you have dreamed of being a part of, but now that you're here (and despite the path that brought you here)...welcome.

I wrote this book out of my desire Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook to provide a parent handbook to this initially scary and lonely world. It is the guidebook that I wished I would have had when I stepped blindly out of everyone else's normal

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world and into this one. I have found my way through the terrain for you and (through trial and error) have mapped out some clear and easy steps to help you see the beauty this world has to offer. If you give it enough time and effort, you will also see that this world can truly be the place of total health, wellness Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook and happiness.

My wish for Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook you is that, by the time you finish reading this book, you will be able to answer all of the questions that have been swirling in your mind since your child's diagnosis. What exactly do we have to avoid? And, even more pressing...what do I feed my family, and where do I find it? Other questions I hope to answer may be ones you haven't had time to think of yet, but are ones that my family has already been through and survived, including: How do I get my family through this stress? Why am I so angry? How can my foodallergic child live a normal existence in this culture of sports drinks, fast food and snack cakes?

My family has been living in this world for six years now, since my son Connor's definitive diagnosis at ten Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook years of age and my husband Frank's diagnosis, the same year, at forty years of age. Connor was diagnosed with allergies to dairy and eggs when he was two. At ten years old, it was determined that he is also allergic or intolerant to gluten, corn, soy, pork, peanuts, artificial colors and MSG. My husband is allergic to eggs, dairy, gluten, and cross-reacts to coffee due to its similarity in properties to gluten (I know...he was very sad). Neither my son nor my husband has had an anaphylactic response to a food. Connor's allergic symptoms are mainly neurological, Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook gastrointestinal or skin related (see CONNOR'S STORY chapter). My husband's allergic symptoms are mainly gastrointestinal and inflammatory. We have come up with some great ideas and developed some helpful tips throughout these six years and are very happy Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook to pass them on to you so that you can benefit immediately from what took us a few years to navigate.

I am not a medical professional but have had the tremendous opportunity to entrust my family's care to some of the best in the country. I encourage you to find a doctor you can trust whose methods and practices make sense to you as a parent. My family's discovery of their food allergies and intolerances was not made through the usual food allergic symptoms of hives or difficulty breathing but through our search for the underlying cause of other health problems that were negatively affecting their lives.

Throughout this book, I will use the words "food allergy" and "food intolerance" interchangeably. They are not the same, Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook I know, but the resulting necessity of having to avoid the allergic or intolerant food is. Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook So to keep it simple, I will use "food allergy" to refer to both.

Lastly, if I could tell you two things right off the bat, it would be this. Number one, you are not alone (even though it seems like it), and number two, it will get easier (even though it may feel like an insurmountable challenge right now). This is my promise to you, and I will hold this hope

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for you until you are able to believe it yourself.

## CHAPTER TWO Attitude

*Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.*

- *Winston Churchill*

I try to be grateful and find positive meaning to everything that comes into my life. My mom always told me that everything happens for a reason, and I believe this to be true. But along with my family's diagnoses of food allergies and *Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook* intolerances, came a wide range of emotions I had not dealt with before at this level of intensity. Initially, I was relieved to discover the reasons behind my family's health issues, but I quickly began to feel an immense amount of grief, anger and loneliness with the challenges with which we were faced.

I vividly remember the first two grocery shopping trips following diagnosis. Our doctor's office had provided us with a very long list of what not to eat and a very short list of what to replace it with. The problem with these lists was that my son was a typical ten year old boy who loved all of the things on the "do not eat" list and was probably addicted to them as well.

My first trip was to our usual grocery store. I remember walking past the bread aisle thinking, "There's nothing we can eat down that aisle." Then walking past the dairy aisle thinking, "There's nothing we can eat down that aisle." Then the cereal aisle... I grew angrier (and madly jealous of the other non-allergic shoppers) as I passed each aisle. Our only safe options seemed to be meat, vegetables and fruit, and how was I going to get my adolescent son to eat just that? Frustrated, I called our doctor's office only to be kindly told that they could tell me what to feed my family, but they *Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook* couldn't tell me how to get them to eat it. Well, it was up to me to figure that one out, and I was bound and determined that I was going to do it.

Initially during this process, you may also find yourself feeling numb, overwhelmed, or angry. These feelings are probably due to grief. You may actually be grieving the loss of a way of life you have come to know, a life that is much more convenient, simple, and easily understood by others. Allow yourself to go through the stages of grief (see <http://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>), and know that it is completely normal to feel this way.

My second trip was to a natural and organic food retail store, Whole Foods Market ([www.wholefoodsmarket.com](http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com)). I'm not sure how or where they find their employees, but every single one of them whom I have dealt with at any Whole Foods Market across the country has been tremendously kind, knowledgeable and extremely helpful.

tears throughout my entire two

I was on the verge of hour shopping trip,

overwhelmed at both the enormity of the challenge facing my family and the relief and gratitude for finding the starting place to safe alternatives to their allergic foods. Several times I was asked "Can I help you?" These clerks had *Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook* no idea that I was unable to blurt out more than "no thank you" without dissolving into a pile of tears at their feet, begging them to hold me as I told them that I just wanted to be able to feed my family.

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“At least it’s not leukemia” became one of the phrases I said to myself (thanks to Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook my friend, Elaine Birkmeier, and her positive encouragement) to get through the beginning stages of dealing with my family’s allergies (although, even the odds of surviving leukemia are pretty good these days). This phrase helped me put Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook everything Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook into perspective.

Realize that you can handle this. You are strong and will become stronger, and now you have the resources you need to get started. If I can do this (a Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook “play by the rules”, working parent with very limited cooking skills), you can do this too.

Put your worries in their place. Night time Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook is not kind to the worrying mother. I often woke up in the middle of the night with anxiety about what I was going to feed my child, fearful he had grown bored of our normal fare. about upcoming events that I knew would I also worried involve food,

brainstorming as to how I was going to help create a “normal” experience for my son without drawing attention to the food allergies that embarrassed him so much.

Many a night I spent cursing the cheap and easy takeout pizza and the “winning classroom” ice cream party, wondering why every social event and school celebration had to include foods my son could not eat. This resulted in a tired, weary, overwhelmed and hopeless mother, which is never a good thing for the usual child, much less one that requires extra care and needs a more energetic, “think on her feet” Mom.

In addition to the loneliness and gloom that the middle of the night can add to your worries, no one is available to make you feel better or to bounce ideas off. As great of a husband as I have, he is not that willing to be talked to death in broad daylight, much less when woken from a dead sleep in the middle of the night by a crying, irrational wife.

In an effort to preserve the sanity I had left, when those negative, anxious thoughts began to creep in as darkness fell, I would not allow myself to think about them. “Wait until morning,” I would tell myself. “Things Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook always seem better in the morning. You can worry about this as much as you want in the morning, but no worrying after dark.” This trick actually began to work, and it really is true. I always had more creative solutions in the morning and more energy to deal with whatever was worrying me. Daylight always brought me the hope that the darkness denied.

Try and exude confidence that your family can handle any food situation. My son had enough of his own anxieties regarding this food thing and being seen as normal. So Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook I decided to fake it until I felt it. “We’ll figure it out...we always do,” I would tell my son and husband (yet inside I had no idea what the answers were). Then slowly I actually started to believe it the more often I said it and the more practice we had handling food situations. Remember that Welcome to the World of Food

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Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook your child is closely watching you during this experience, learning from your reactions and feeling everything that you do and more. Out of this seemingly devastating hand that life has dealt you, you can help your child learn Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook strong coping skills, build Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook resilience and learn positive thinking. These are great life lessons for any child, but they will be especially helpful to a child with health challenges.

If you aren't already, you will also need to learn how to be kindly assertive. You must become your child's biggest advocate to guarantee their safety and get their needs met, even if it means asking someone else to go above and beyond their call of duty or to make a special exception. Know that most people really want to help your child. I truly believe that. It's your job to ask nicely for the help you need, tell people exactly how to help you, and keep clarifying until you are satisfied with the results. We'll talk more about this throughout the following chapters, and I'll give you specific tips on what to say and do in situations that require you to take control.

Take it one day at a time (really...it works!). While you read this book, take note of the things you think will work for your family, and try them out. Celebrate your every success..."Yay, we found another restaurant where we can eat!" And let go of the things that didn't work so well..."Well, that was yucky! Let's try something else." Remember that each day you are exactly where you are supposed to be in your child's journey. Don't assume that you should be better at navigating this food-allergic world than you are at any particular moment. Just take a deep breath Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook and tell yourself you're going to make it.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### How To Talk To Your Child

The discovery of Connor's food allergies came at the time in his development when all he wanted was to fit in with others...not a good combination. It Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook has taken him some time to realize that the gains to his health (now and throughout his lifetime) from changing his diet far outweigh the feelings of not fitting in, Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook and he's a stronger person because of it. His survival of this process has taught him the important lesson of finding comfort in being himself. The following quote is posted on his bedroom wall and is the way he lives his life.

*In a world where you can be anything...be yourself!*

*-Etta Turner*

Food is included in all things social – lunch every day at school, dinner at a friend's house, snacks at the movies. So when all your child wants to do is fit in, yet it's pointed out to him every day (at least in his mind) that he's not like everyone else, a child can start feeling bad about being different. And this is where you come in.

My son's anxiety about food at social situations was obvious from the very beginning. As each event got closer, he would begin to ask lots of questions about food arrangements. I am Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook thankful he did ask these questions, as I was having enough of my own anxiety for him and was so preoccupied with figuring the situation out, that I didn't always recognize his need to hear what

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the plan was. Eventually we all realized that these discussions needed to take place as soon as we started planning for an event, in order to not allow the fear of uncertainty to build for any of us.

Besides having discussions about food plans, I realized we needed *Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook* to totally open up the lines of communication with our son and have deeper discussions about the acceptance of being different, as that was the real issue at hand. Anyone with a health abnormality *Welcome to the World of Food Allergies and Intolerances: A Parent's Handbook* will tell you that one of the things that makes the situation so scary and awkward is that it feels like you are the only one in the world that has ever received this diagnosis.

## **Welcome To The World Of Food Allergies And Intolerances A Parent S Handbook**

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