

Despite fears about overregulation, we do need to have some caution about what our kids eat in school.

*A recent incident involving Double Stuf Oreos highlights the debate over how much supervision of what children eat at school is too much. **Donald F. Kettl** writes that while many are concerned about the overregulation of what students eat at school, it makes sense to take precautions against exposing them to things that can be genuinely harmful.*



Just by sending a frustrated tweet, a suburban Philadelphia mother set off a tsunami. “Insanity!” the woman fumed. “I have to sign a permission slip so my middle-schooler can eat an Oreo.” She was telling the truth, and her tweet (since deleted) inadvertently launched a national debate over whether a lawsuit-crazed society had finally gone too far.

The cookie in question was actually a Double Stuf Oreo. The permission slip came one day in March from Darlene Porter, a teacher at Welsh Valley Middle School in the suburbs of Philadelphia. The purpose: an experiment on the earth’s tectonic plates.

According to the permission slip, students would “model plate movement and observe earth’s features,” using the cookie to “simulate the 3 types of plate boundaries.” But then came the crucial part. “The students may eat the Oreo after the investigation if this is okay with you. The students do NOT have to eat the Oreo if they do not wish to do so.” A warning at the end: “Without a signed permission slip, my child understands that he/she will not be able to sample the Oreo.”



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The story exploded on social media. Dutchman61 complained about “the sheer [sic] idiocy of what our schools and institutions have become. And the really ugly truth is that there are idiots who would sue if their kid was allowed to have an Oreo.” From Scotland, AMCK1997 was sympathetic to the reasons for the permission slip, arguing a lawsuit could cost the teacher her job. Still, he concluded, “it does seem a bit ridiculous.”

Doug Young, the school district's spokesman, told the press, "It's one teacher who was really trying to do her due diligence, quite honestly." A parent with an allergy tried to help by sending in gluten-free Oreos. And the mother who kicked off the battle made it clear that she didn't blame the teacher. "I fault our crazy culture," she said.

Was the Oreo fracas just one more indignity imposed by a super-suing, over-regulated society? Or, given what we know about the way food affects kids' health, was it an enlightened step forward? One school employee defended the cookie warning. "There are many children in the school I work at that have severe food allergies," she wrote. "This mother needs to chill out and be happy that the teacher is concerned that one of her students has food allergies."

The incident underscores a bigger divide among parents over how much supervision of children is too much supervision. One blogger wondered whether so-called helicopter parents in 2024 would give their kids swallowable sensors that would tell a smartphone if the kids were eating too much sugar, fat or gluten. By then, this writer imagined, "letting kids do anything on their own will be considered completely irresponsible, or even insane."

Humor columnist Dave Barry looked back to the 1960s. His parents, Barry [reminisced](#) in The Wall Street Journal, "didn't worry about consuming trans fats, gluten, fructose, and all the other food components now considered so dangerous they could be used to rob a bank ('Give him the money! He's got gluten!')." A school nurse voiced the same sentiments. "You would not believe the insanity of the parents nowadays," she wrote. "Gluten! Sugar! Allergies! There are parents who live in perpetual fear and want everyone else to be afraid with them. Sadly, most school districts give in to these demands."

For some kids, however, gluten is truly no joke. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has found that in some cases, gluten can cause serious gastrointestinal problems and life-threatening metabolic problems. Later in life, some of those with celiac disease, which is worsened by gluten, develop problems ranging from epilepsy and infertility to neuropathy and high-mortality cancer. Science has come a long way since the 1960s, when many children suffered from problems that researchers have since learned can be prevented. And some of that prevention comes from being careful with what the kids eat.

In fact, concerns about kids' reactions to allergens aren't just a matter of regulatory excess. Chicago Public Schools stock epinephrine autoinjectors, which allow the staff to treat potentially fatal anaphylaxis — difficulty in breathing and a possible heart attack — that can result when sensitive kids are exposed to certain foods. In the 2013-2014 school year, there were 38 emergency injections. Half of the shots were for kids with a first-time reaction who had never had problems before. All survived. In the end, being extra careful about exposing kids to things that can hurt them is much more than an opportunity for blogger flippancy. Precautions have to be balanced with common sense, but it's a mistake to sacrifice science to sarcasm.

Still, there's one other comment that deserves careful attention. One blogger wasn't worried about intrusive school nannying, but had an entirely different problem to complain about. How could the teacher use Double Stuf Oreos, he wanted to know, when Hydrox cookies were an obviously better choice for the experiment?

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About the author

Donald F. Kettl – *University of Maryland*

Donald F. Kettl is professor of public policy at the University of Maryland. He is also a nonresident senior fellow in the Volcker Alliance and in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. Among other books, Kettl is the author of *The Politics of the Administrative Process and System Under Stress*, both published by SAGE/CQ Press.



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