

ABSTRACT
NAVIGATING HEALTH MANAGEMENT DECISIONS IN PEDIATRIC FOOD ALLERGY:
EXPLORING CAREGIVER NEEDS, EXPERIENCES, AND BEHAVIORS

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Food allergy (FA) is a prevalent and often severe condition, affecting approximately 8% of children in the U.S. (Gupta et al., 2011; Robson & Assa'ad, 2024). The day-to-day management of FA, including making critical decisions throughout the illness course, primarily rests with caregivers. This responsibility can impose significant psychosocial demands on caregivers as they must navigate complex choices about treatment and management (Knibb & Jones, 2024). These demands are further compounded by the increasing number of health management options for food allergies, which present additional decision-making challenges (Collins et al., 2024; Hamadi et al., 2024; Lieberman, 2024; Umetsu, 2024). Caregivers' choices may vary significantly based on their needs, experiences, and characteristics (Dale & Hemmerich, 2009; Hoefel, O'Connor, et al., 2020). As children age and transition into roles of greater self-management, these decision-making dynamics become even more complex.

Involving children and adolescents in decision-making is crucial, as it can lead to better health outcomes, greater adherence to management plans, and enhanced self-efficacy (Miller, 2018b; Miller et al., 2017; Miller & Jawad, 2014, 2019). Empowering young patients to participate in healthcare decisions can foster a sense of responsibility and prepare them for effective self-management, which is essential as they transition into adulthood.

Despite the importance of these decisions, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the influence of caregiver decisional needs, conflict, and anxiety on decision-making processes in pediatric food allergy management. Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how these caregiver factors affect child and adolescent involvement in shared decision-making. Understanding these influences is essential to ensuring that SDM is effective and supportive for both caregivers and patients.

This dissertation aims to address these gaps by conducting in-depth psychosocial research, exploring how caregiver decisional needs, conflict, and anxiety impact decision-making and the involvement of children in these processes. By investigating these areas, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of pediatric food allergy management, promote the active involvement of children and adolescents in decision-making, and improve the support and guidance provided to families facing these challenges.