

## Letter to the teachers

Hello my name is Sasha Jacombs I'm 12 years old and I have had Type 1 Diabetes since I was four years old. Some of the people reading this may not know what that is, so I had better tell you a bit about diabetes. Type 1 Diabetes is when your pancreas stops making insulin. It is an autoimmune condition where the body turns on itself and attacks the insulin producing cells. There is nothing I could have done to stop it from happening. No diet or exercise, or anything else could have prevented it. Even though one science teacher at my school said, in the presence of another pupil with type 1 diabetes, that diabetes is caused by eating the wrong foods and being overweight and lazy! That was very hurtful! I am very slim and always have been.

If you know someone with type 2 diabetes, don't assume that you know something about how type 1 diabetes is treated. It is a different condition and the treatment is very different and always requires insulin and careful blood sugar monitoring and planning of meals and snacks. You can read more about diabetes on the Diabetes UK website. On certain injection regimens, especially those used by younger children, the timing of snacks and meals is very, very important. If snacks are needed they should always be on time. Otherwise a child could have a bad hypo.

It is O.K for people with diabetes to eat some sweets, as long as it is part of a balanced diet and you are giving insulin to "cover it" or using it to treat low blood sugar or before sports or games. I get really fed up with the "food police" saying, "Should you really be eating that"?! What people don't understand is that a sandwich can have as much carbohydrate as a bar of chocolate or an ice cream. People still have the idea that if we didn't eat sugar we would be fine!!! They don't understand that even if we never ate a single sweet or piece of chocolate we would still have to give insulin to deal with the carbohydrates in our diet. Basically, diabetes is problem with the carbohydrate metabolism, so ALL carbohydrates raise the blood glucose level if not enough insulin is given.

Insulin is needed to "open" the cells in order for the body to be able to use glucose in the blood stream this is the body's main fuel. The brain uses a lot of glucose to work and without glucose the

brain cannot function properly. Without glucose the brain cannot work at all. That is why sometimes people having a bad hypo cannot think properly and may need some assistance at times, though most older children can recognise a hypo and treat it themselves. That is why it is very important to be able to test the blood sugar in the classroom with as little disruption as possible. When I was about 8 years old I used to keep my meter and "Hypo" box by my desk and if the teacher was reading a story or teaching I just used to test my blood sugar if I felt "not right". Sometimes I was ok and nothing needed doing, but at other times I might need a few glucose tablets or biscuits. The teacher would look over to make sure I was ok, but carried on teaching. If my blood sugar was high I would be allowed to go and ring my mum or dad to ask advice and how much insulin to give to correct this. I kept my insulin pen in the school office. This worked out very well. I also had a chart showing what actions I should take according to what my blood sugar was. When I was younger the teacher used to have to read it to me but when I was older I could read this for myself. I have never had a severe hypo at school but I have had several fits in the night when my blood sugar has gone very, very low, as I don't wake up by myself if I go low when I am asleep. During the day my hypo awareness is very good.

Sometimes when I went low I used to have a bad headache or feel weepy or sometimes very grumpy or just really tired. Most of the time I can recognise when I feel low and need to test my blood sugar. It is impossible for someone never to have low blood sugar at some time, or to have high blood sugar. It isn't usually anyone's fault. Lots of things affect the blood sugar levels. Insulin doses, types and amounts of carbohydrate, illness, exercise, excitement, emotions. So if someone goes low, or their blood sugar is unexpectedly high, it could be for one of many reasons and not, as some teachers seem to think, from deliberately not taking care of themselves.

Sometimes teachers might think that you are making up that you are low, in order to eat or drink something. However this is not likely as children like to "fit in" and be the same as their friends and they don't want to draw attention to themselves.

As I got older I got use to having diabetes, but as I changed classes I had to keep on explaining what it was and how I could

handle it on my own. Though sometimes I did need more help especially when I was younger.

Teachers would always listen to my mum and dad when they came to tell them about me and they seem to understand they would be fine for a few weeks, knowing when I had to have my snacks and letting me go out of my lessons to test my blood sugars (when I was in the infant school I wasn't allowed to test in classroom) and eat something, or take insulin if I needed. But after that they started to forget, so when I would get out of my chair to go and check my blood sugar, they would tell me to sit back down, or when I needed a snack and the lesson ran over time they wouldn't let me go and have it. Then they got cross when I reminded them. Supply (substitute) teachers are usually the worse!! They may have been told that they have a child with diabetes in their class but seldom know what that actually means, or what they should look out for or do.

One of the things that I hate most about having diabetes is having a hypo, short for **Hypoglycaemia**, this sounds funny, but a hypo is when you go low (too little glucose in your blood) you would think it would be when you go high because you say it like "high-po", but no, its when you go low. Hyper which sounds similar, but actually means high blood sugar and is short for **Hyperglycaemia**. When you're blood sugar is high, you can feel unwell and thirsty and need to go to the toilet more often.

The thing with hypos is that it's the worse feeling ever, well maybe not ever, but its not very nice, so let's say you are playing tennis and you're not feeling very well, so you ask the teacher if you can sit out, they would say yes and you would check your blood sugar it was low you would give yourself something sugary to eat or drink, like glucose tablets or Lucozade or non diet soda drink and wait until you would feel better, then you would ask the teacher if you could start playing tennis again and they would say "I think you better sit out for the rest of the games lesson in case you go low again". Sometimes this is annoying as I now feel ok and can check my blood sugar again.

I remember a time just before I was going into the new junior school and my mum and dad were having a meeting with some teachers and one of them kept on saying that at my age I was old enough to be responsible for my own diabetes care. I was only

seven at the time and still needed some help sometimes and reminders about snack times. Other teachers asked questions and listened, but this deputy head made us feel like we were wasting her time. She didn't even stay for all of the meeting but left after a short time, saying that she had to go and meet another set of parents whose child has a disability. We all felt that she wasn't listening!! She used to shout at me when I was going back into school at break time to test my blood sugar saying that I should not be in the school!

As I got older I learnt to deal with teachers like that and tell them and explain what I had to do and I got better at handling my diabetes, so in year 6 I could stay after school to rehearse for the year 6 play. I love to act, so I was really excited when I got a really good main part I was so happy because I got the part and the teachers didn't worry that I would go low on stage. I tested before going on and ate something if my blood sugar was dropping a bit. I checked frequently as it was a long play managed it all by myself. I was really proud and happy. I was glad that the teachers hadn't ruled me out of the play because of my diabetes. The teacher who were the best were the ones who listened carefully and offered help if needed.

Telling my teachers that I had diabetes was easier up to last year at junior school, but in year 7, at my new secondary school, I had all different teachers for subjects so I had 17 teachers to tell. So a lot of teachers at the start didn't know, so I had to keep telling them and they forgot so I had to remind them. My diabetes clinic had a special evening arranged for teachers and head teachers of senior schools to come for a talk about children with diabetes in their care. Only one teacher from our school attended the meeting! and only a couple of teachers from another secondary school. Even though the meeting was arranged weeks ahead. We did send in a whole load of information about diabetes to the school but most teachers still didn't seem to know much about it! No one seems to bother to read the information. My parents met with the special needs support teacher and sent letters and information to the school but I have still found that most teachers that I have don't realise that I have diabetes, let alone what they should do or look out for.

One of the things that was really really annoying was that I had to check my blood sugar somewhere at break and lunchtime and my tutor room was the best place. My tutor gave me permission to go there to check my blood sugar there during these times and take a friend with me in case I was low. However because children are not usually allowed in school at these times I was always being told off and yelled at for being in school and sent out. Even though I tried to explain that I had permission.

The worse time was when a really mean teacher came in to the class during lunchtime when I had just tested my blood sugar, it was high and I was about to call my dad on my mobile (mobile phones are allowed in my school) she came in and started shouting at me and my friend, I tried to explain to her and she said "listen to me or I will confiscate that phone" and then sent us out and my blood sugar was still really high. My tutor then saw the teacher concerned and my tutor made me and two friends special school passes, so that I can go to the classroom during the break and lunchtime. It's upsetting when people don't listen.

I know teachers have a lot to do but sometimes they just shout us down and won't even listen when I try to explain.

There was also another instance where we were delayed by a teacher in a previous lesson because we had been doing end of term tests and we missed our morning break completely and had to go to the next class straightaway. Kids started getting their snacks out to eat them (our lunchtime isn't until 1.30 pm). I gave my insulin and started to eat my snack and suddenly this teacher came into the corridor shouting and ranting about us all eating in school and when we tried to tell him why, he wouldn't listen and wouldn't let me to explain that I HAD to eat right now.

I would say to teachers who are having a child with diabetes in their class to please, please, read all the information sent in by the parents and diabetes clinic and do ask or phone the parents if there is anything you don't understand or are concerned about. Please listen to what children are telling you. Its bad enough to have this condition without having to put up with thoughtless comments and ignorance about the condition and being shouted out when you are doing your best to take care of your diabetes.

Sasha Jacombs      aged 12