



Home, Sweet Home (and Other Friendly, Welcoming Environments)



-In the Bedroom-

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People who *don't* have disabilities modify their environments and use tools to make life better. People *with* disabilities may also need modifications in their environments and tools to make life better. This is one in a series of articles about ways to create accessible, friendly, and welcoming environments for all.

Mmm—crawling into a warm, snuggly bed at night. Eeek—rushing around in the morning to grab clothes and shoes, and being able to get to them quickly and easily. Ahhh—having a safe, comfortable place for some needed privacy and quiet time. These are just some of the hallmarks of a great bedroom!

What about the bedrooms of children and adults with disabilities? Do they have the same great features? And are they user-friendly and accessible? If not, it doesn't take much to make the change!

The right furniture or storage space for clothes, shoes, toys, books, and other goodies is critical—especially for anyone who has mobility or similar needs. The closet rod can be lowered for easier access, or the rod can be removed and the closet can be filled with stackable bins/open cabinets for easy retrieval of clothes or shoes. Bi-fold doors allow easier access than sliding doors; but the doors might need to come all the way off in some instances. If so, install a shower curtain rod, a cloth shower curtain, and easy-to-pull rings so the closet can be “closed” when not in use.

People who use wheelchairs may have difficulty using traditional dressers—the drawers and/or the contents of the drawers may not be easy to reach. One alternative to traditional furniture includes using a kitchen/bathroom countertop, attached to the wall and braced to the floor (since there won't be a cabinet underneath to support the weight of the countertop). Line the countertops with plastic bins for clothing, toys, books, and more. (Leave some countertop space

clear for a great accessible desk!) Another alternative is to line the walls with shelves, placed at the appropriate height. Place bins on the shelves to hold clothing, toys, books, and other items. Both of these options open up the room, providing more maneuvering space for a wheelchair or other mobility device. Hooks on the wall (or on a pegboard) can be used for pajamas, coats, or other items.

What about the bed? Use whatever works, regardless of what bedrooms are “supposed” to look like. If a mattress on the floor works best for someone who may easily fall out of bed, go for it! On the other hand, a person who uses a wheelchair may need a bed at a certain height to make transfers easier. If so, “hospital-type” beds that rise up and down are available. Or increase the height of the bed with leg extensions placed at the four corners of the bed frame (available from “bed and bath,” discount stores, etc.). To make the bed lower, take off the wheels of the bed frame (assuming it has wheels), or take the bed off the frame and support it with planks of lumber placed atop cinder blocks or other sturdy material at the correct height.

Create a handy nightstand with a width of countertop attached to the wall and braced to the floor, placed at just the right height. Alternatively, create a “headboard” with a length of shelving—or even two shelves—at the head of the bed, to hold a lamp, a glass of water, books, and other items that need to be within arm's reach.

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If getting in/out of bed is difficult, a wide variety of trapeze bars and transfer devices are available. Look through catalogs that feature accessible products, search the Internet, or contact your local durable medical equipment dealer.

If falling off the side of the bed is an issue and putting the mattress on the floor won't work, bed rails that extend half the length of the bed are available. But if an even longer rail is needed, look for "day bed" frames—the metal type that are normally along the back and sides of the bed. Position the bed so it's up against the wall on one side, and put the day bed frame along the "open" side of the bed. The person will have to get in/out of the bed from the foot of the bed, but he won't fall out anymore! In my son's case, we used a day bed frame along the wall side of the bed—attaching it directly to the wall—so he'd have something firm to grab onto to help him turn over in the bed.

Bedcovers can sometimes create problems. If a top sheet, a blanket, *and* a bedspread are too much to handle, ditch the top sheet and blanket, substitute a comforter for the traditional bedspread, and then buy or make a duvet cover that slips over the comforter. It's easier to wash this cover on a regular basis (and it acts like a top sheet) than washing the bulky comforter.

If a child needs another warm body in the room to feel comfortable, invest in a trundle bed. The child can stay in his bed, and the "guest" can quickly and easily pull out the bottom bed. At the right time, the "guest" can leave quietly without waking the sleeping child!

In our family, our son, Benjamin, slept with my husband and me on many nights. Because of his cerebral palsy, he had difficulty turning over and getting comfortable in bed at night, so one of us often had to get up several times during the night—and no one got any sleep. In addition, unlike other children, Benjamin was unable to get out of bed and come to

us if he was scared or had a nightmare. He could call us for help on the intercom. But, again, we didn't get a full night's sleep. So, a threesome in our king-sized bed made for a good night's sleep for all. As he got older and felt more comfortable in a bed alone, he still had fears and felt more comfortable with someone close by. So we bought trundle beds for both kids' rooms: one night they slept in our son's room, the next night they slept in our daughter's room. The solution worked for everyone—and the kids had fun whispering to each other in the dark!

Lighting in a bedroom is important—for reading, writing, playing, or enjoying quiet time before sleep. A lamp on a nightstand can be converted to a "touch lamp," or it can be turned on/off by a voice-activated control. Look for these items in home/hardware stores. And to enable the person to summon help while in bed, use an intercom system (check out Radio Shack and similar stores).

When thinking about the bedroom, think age-appropriate, as well as accessibility and user-friendliness. Let a three-year-old "grow up" by sleeping in a "big bed"—instead of a crib—and buy bed rails if they're needed. Then stock his room with bins or shelves to make it easy for him to put away his toys and keep his room clean. Give a 12-year-old places to keep her CD player and display photos of her favorite "super stars." The room of a 20-year-old should look very different from the room of a five-year-old!

Before doing *anything*, call a family meeting and talk to everyone (including the person with a disability) about what changes may be helpful. And if the person shares a room, the roommates can brainstorm ideas that will work for both. Then do lots of looking—at stores, through catalogs, and on the Internet. In our family, we've tried lots of different things over the years to make sure our son's room is accessible and meets his needs. Enjoy the process of trial and error—it's a great learning experience—and you'll end up with a great, comfy, user-friendly bedroom!