



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



# -Physical Access-

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

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.

Twelve-year-old Joseph is forced to crawl around his house. At school, he independently motors around his classroom and down the halls in his power wheelchair. But his mom thinks his chair is “too big” for the house, and said, “We’d have to rearrange the furniture and get rid of some. And we can’t afford a wheelchair accessible van to transport it.”

Sarah, in her twenties, wants to live in a regular apartment instead of the group home. But the service coordinator says she cannot find an accessible apartment in the neighborhood.

At age six, Cary could be helping more around the house and doing more in school, but because of his short stature, he can’t reach countertops, cabinets, and other things in his home and classroom. Also, his parents and teachers don’t believe Cary has the cognitive ability to do what other six-year-olds do.

Why do these and other situations continue to exist? The answers are varied: lack of awareness, money, selfishness, inaccurate perceptions, laziness, and . . . the list is endless. The examples above are a tiny sampling of the unfriendly, exclusive, inaccessible settings which many individuals with disabilities face every day. While some people may believe the disability is the “problem,” others are realizing that the real “problem” is our attitude about disability, which, in turn gives birth to environmental barriers.

Creating accessible, friendly, and welcoming environments is more than “doing the right thing.” It’s a critical component in ensuring successful lives for children and adults with disabilities. If a person can’t be competent and successful *in her own home*, how can we expect competency and success in other environments?

Joseph’s family may, indeed, need to get rid of some furniture and rearrange the rest. Wouldn’t the effort be worth it to enable Joseph to have more freedom and dignity in his own home? If Joseph’s mom lives long enough, she’ll probably acquire a disability through the aging process and may need to use a wheelchair. What would she want for herself in that circumstance? How would *she* feel if she were forced to crawl in her own home, just because others didn’t want to make accommodations for her?

A wheelchair accessible vehicle for Joseph may be preferable, it’s not absolutely necessary at this point in time. A suitcase ramp can be used to drive the chair into the back of a mini-van. The seatback of the chair can be removed or lowered if necessary, in order for the chair to fit. This seems a small investment of money and effort, when compared to the great return and positive impact on Joseph’s life.

Sarah feels she’s stuck in the group home because the service coordinator has only looked for a “perfect” accessible apartment, which Sarah knows probably doesn’t exist. She knows that “almost accessible” apartments *do* exist (she’s visited friends who live in such places), and modifications could be easily made. A short threshold ramp would remedy the three-inch step at the front door. Door widths can be widened two inches by installing offset hinges. These, along with a few other simple and inexpensive modifications, would meet Sarah’s needs and allow her to live on her own.

In Cary’s case, modifications to enable him to reach things and take his role as a helpful six-year-old are even simpler! Step stools and/or a kitchen stool can put Cary at just the right height to reach kitchen

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countertops, the top of his dresser, and other areas. Dishes and other items can be moved to lower cabinets so Cary can help set the table and put clean dishes away; the milk jug and other items can be moved to a lower shelf in the refrigerator so Cary can get his own snacks; the closet rod can be lowered or Cary's clothes can be folded and put in drawers; and other changes can be made. Similar modifications can be made in Cary's classroom at school. And once Cary can reach things and participate more fully in life at home and school, his parents and teachers might realize Cary is a very smart, capable boy!

It appears that many parents, educators, and others who impact the lives of people with disabilities may not fully appreciate the value of accessible environments. As a parent, I know that it's often easier and faster for *me* to do a task than help my son, Benjamin, learn how to do it. But is that really fair to him? Benj uses a wheelchair, and he loves his snack of popcorn in the evening. For years, his sister, Emily, his dad, or I put the bag of popcorn in the microwave, pushed the buttons, opened the bag, and poured the popcorn in the bowl for Benj. But once we did a little kitchen remodeling, bought a different microwave oven (one that Benj could easily use), placed the microwave where Benj could reach it, and put the bowls in an easier-to-reach location, Benj was able to make his own popcorn. This was a great improvement *for everyone in the family!*

At school, the rearrangement of desks and other simple changes enabled Benjamin to make his way around the classroom, chat with a friend, and more. Ditto in the lunchroom, library, and other places.

When my children were young, Emily decided she should "play Santa" on Christmas morning. On her hands and knees, she pulled the presents out from under the Christmas tree, and distributed them all around. Benjamin wanted to help, too, so she placed some on his wheelchair tray for him to give out. They really enjoyed this "grown-up" job, but I realized Benj

could do it only if someone else helped. So the next Christmas, we bought a smaller tree and placed it on a card table, along with all the gifts. Both children experienced the joy of playing Santa—it was the best Christmas ever!

Inaccessible and unfriendly environments which many people with disabilities are forced to endure represent great personal losses: the loss of dignity; the loss of autonomy and self-determination; and the loss of valuable opportunities to learn, grow, and participate. Can we afford to keep inflicting these losses?

Our homes, specifically, must be held to the highest standards of friendly, welcoming, and accessible environments. Home is where children learn the basics that will carry them throughout their lives. How can we expect kids with disabilities to learn all the things they'll need to know to be successful as adults if their own homes—their bedrooms, kitchens, family rooms—aren't accessible and friendly? Home is where the heart is. If a child's home is essentially a hostile environment, does he feel loved and included? Does he feel he's a valuable member of the family?

For people who *don't* have disabilities, home is that comfortable, easy-to-be-in place you return to day in and day out, where the stresses of the world are replaced with peace, privacy, and autonomy. How might you feel if *your* own home was not a warm, easy-to-be-in place where you're master?

In general, creating accessible, friendly, and welcoming environments requires minimal time, effort, and money. What will it take to make it happen? It all starts in our heads. Consider what you would want if it were you. Get the person with a disability involved in the process. Survey the environment. Do a lot of wondering, ask "what if," and be creative. Ask others for their advice—two heads are better than one. Look for the simplest means first, and look for helpful items and ideas when shopping at discount and other stores (instead of starting with specialty sources). If the first idea doesn't work, keep trying. Be determined—you *will* succeed and you'll change someone's life in the process!