



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



-In the Kitchen-

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, 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.

Gadgets, doo-dads, and whachamacallits for food, drink, and in the kitchen can be invaluable tools for many people with disabilities (and people who don't have disabilities, too)! This installation of "Home, Sweet Home" features ideas that may be helpful for children and adults who have a variety of eating/drinking needs.

Straws (for drinks, soups, and semi-liquid foods) are a must for many. Disposable straws may be too flimsy, too short, and/or narrow, but a couple of different alternatives might do the trick. A flexible straw that is longer and with a wider circumference may be helpful for some folks. Check out the great long straws and cup holder made for "hands-free" drinking at www.hummingbirdsipper.com. Alternatively, you may be able to find longer, flexible straws in ordinary stores, packaged with a sports/travel cup. Even if you don't need the cup, buy it for the straw!

My son, Benjamin, started out with the flexible straws in lidded cups. He could pop it in his wheelchair's cup holder and keep it handy at all times. But he tended to bite on the straws and they were chewed up after only a few days, so a *rigid plastic* straw worked better. We found just the right thing at a medical supply store: a package of three 24-inch straws! They can be left long—great for drinking soup—or cut to the desired length with a hack saw, then sanded smooth. They last and last and last! (And I use them, too!)

If you've visited a sporting goods store lately, you might have seen the latest in hiking gear: a large capacity water bottle, complete with very long straw,

worn as a backpack. This may be a very handy item for someone who uses a wheelchair! Sling the pack on the back of Nancy's chair, position the straw close to her face, and—presto—Nancy is more self-sufficient. Sporting goods stores also have a great variety of water/beverage bottles and containers that might be helpful. While you're there, check out their camping dishes and eating utensils, too. Some of the "all-in-one" utensils—like a combo fork/spoon—are oversized and unbreakable.

In our home, we drink gallons of iced tea! But it was hard for Benj to get his own glass of tea. First, he wasn't able to get the lids on and off most lidded cups. Second, he had great difficulty trying to pour from a typical pitcher. After buying numerous cups with lids, we finally found one he could do all by himself. Then we bought a beverage dispenser for the refrigerator—one of those plastic "jugs" that fit in the fridge and have a spigot. We adjusted the refrigerator shelves so the dispenser would be at the right height for Benj. With these easy and inexpensive accommodations, he can get his own tea!

Adapted utensils may enable a person to eat independently. Spoons, forks, knives, and other kitchen utensils with a variety of different types of handles are available from medical supply stores and adaptive equipment catalogs. Children's utensils (with fat handles)—widely-available in regular stores—may also work. "Asian" spoons (the big white ones with a deep bowl and a wider hand grip) may work better than traditional spoons. I'm a big soup eater, and I prefer the Asian spoons!

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You can even make your own adapted utensils! Check your local hobby store for the plastic clay-like material you can bake. Form the clay around the handle of a typical metal fork, spoon, or knife; have the person who will use the utensil grip it (firmly, if possible, to make indentations), then follow the instructions and bake in the oven until it's hardened. If needed, you can *bend* the utensil before applying the clay. Some people can feed themselves easier if the utensil is angled. This is the case for my son, as he has difficulty bending his wrist at the correct angle in order to get the "straight" spoon/fork to his mouth—so an angled utensil works best. Back to the clay—some clays that don't have to be baked: they harden at room temperature. Look for those at the hobby store, too. With these, you can adapt toothbrushes, pens, paintbrushes, or other items that wouldn't survive a hot oven.

With the increase in the population of mature citizens (*I'm almost there!*), the market is responding with wonderful products to make the kitchen more accessible and increase a person's self-sufficiency. Bowls and plates with non-slip bottoms and plates with high sides may be helpful items. And "easy grip" gadgets can be used by every member of the family: big spoons for stirring stew, potato peelers, and more. When the boob-tube is on, pay attention to those commercials for "as seen on TV" products that are geared to older people—many will also work great for children and adults with disabilities!

A variety of "disability-specific" items can be found on the Internet. Do a search for "daily living aids," or use other specific keywords and be amazed! For example, there's a nifty product that's a combination cutting board with built-in knife, with a non-skid surface—great for a person who has difficulty using both hands or needs a little extra help using a knife.

Other easy accommodations can make life better. Non-slip "fabric" is widely-available in mainstream stores, and it can keep dishes (as well as toys, books, and many other things) in place. (When my

son was young, a piece of non-slip fabric on the music bench kept him from sliding off!)

Simply moving things around in kitchen drawers, shelves, and in the fridge can enable a child or adult with a disability to be more self-reliant. After we moved the silverware to a lower drawer and the dishes to a different spot, Benjamin could see and reach the things he needed.

Transferring cereal, nuts, and other dry goods into easy-open, see-through plastic containers makes it easier to find and get the food one wants. Ketchup, mustard, and other condiments in the new "fat" bottles with the opening at the bottom have been a boon in our home.

A microwave or toaster oven with easy-to-use controls can enable a person to cook for herself. Placing an angled mirror at the rear of the stove top (like the ones over the veggies in the grocery store) allows a person using a wheelchair, a person who's short, or a child to see what's cooking.

A kitchen faucet that swivels and has the pull-out feature for handheld use can be a great help. And installing such a faucet in a *bathroom sink* can enable a person to be more self-sufficient with brushing teeth, washing hair, and more.

We remodeled our kitchen and replaced most cabinets with large drawers. A person who uses a wheelchair usually finds it difficult to reach things in cabinets, as it's hard to get close enough to reach all the way in (the footplate of the wheelchair gets in the way). But with drawers, Benjamin can pull the drawer out and reach everything.

These are just a few of the many ways we can make our homes accessible to all. It might take some experimentation to find the answer that's right in your home, but your efforts will pay big dividends! The first time a person with a disability can get her own tea, cook his own popcorn, help set the table, or accomplish any other task will be a time to celebrate! If we spend some time thinking and browse all the great new doo-dads available today, it's easy to create welcoming, accessible environments for all!