



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



-Self-Sufficiency-

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.

One of the barriers to individuals with disabilities leading real lives—included in their communities, and living in the homes of their choice, with whatever supports they need—is the belief that they “can’t take care of themselves.” In many cases, this translates into “the person is unable to cook.”

Today, thousands of adults with disabilities are housed in segregated, congregate living quarters. Many—if not most—would prefer a home of their own. Also, millions of parents are concerned about the future of their children with disabilities. Most are hoping their sons and daughters will enjoy successful and inclusive lives in their communities, but many bite their fingernails with worry, unsure how this will happen. There are a variety of strategies to ensure individuals with labels *can* “take care of themselves,” e.g., can cook!

Why don't more children and adults with disabilities learn to cook? In general, because parents or service providers believe the person doesn't have the physical or mental abilities, or the parent/provider has never *attempted* to help the person learn because of fears the person will get hurt. Let's move beyond these barriers!

First, let's define “cooking.” Long ago, it meant collecting a number of ingredients and either following a recipe from a book or creating a dish of your own design. Today, cooking *may* involve those time- and labor-intensive activities in a few homes. But for most of us, cooking is translated into “meal preparation” and it looks very different than in our

grandmother's time! Breakfast might be prepared by pouring milk in a bowl of cereal, toasting a breakfast pastry, or popping a “hot pocket” in the microwave. Similarly, lunch preparation could be slapping a sandwich together or tossing a salad. And dinner? That could be a TV dinner in the microwave or a “hamburger helper” meal. So let's *get real* about what it means to “cook” in today's world!

Service providers: stop writing goals about cooking that are based on 1950s *Ozzie and Harriet* mentality. Parents: stop thinking your children can never live on their own because they can't read and follow a recipe book! Do *you* put on an apron every night, open a cookbook, and slave over a hot stove, creating a three-course, cooked-from-scratch meal every night? *Expecting or demanding a person under our influence to do more than we do is unconscionable!*

Children with disabilities, just like all children, can and should learn to prepare meals under the tutelage of their parents—at home, naturally! And the easiest way to do this is to make it a family affair using this mantra: if you want to eat, you must help!

We also need to have high expectations. If we *believe* a person can learn new skills, we'll do what it takes to make this happen. And “what it will take” includes: (1) being very patient, (2) expecting accidents to occur and dealing with them in a positive way—by having the, “We learn by our mistakes,” attitude, and keeping Band Aids and ointment handy; and (3) making accommodations, such as finding utensils, a better microwave, or other tools that work

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for the learner; rearranging the kitchen, if necessary; and making other changes.

The family can plan meals a week in advance (or two-person teams can rotate this responsibility), make the grocery list, and go shopping together. When it's time to prepare a meal, divide the responsibilities (and change them on a regular basis, so everyone learns new things). Alternatively, each child in the family can pick a night and decide what will be served. If possible, Jennifer can cook the meal all by herself (and receive gracious compliments from other family members on her mac and cheese) or she can get help from others, as needed.

Younger children can help pour cereal, make toast and spread the jam, and/or make their own sandwiches for school lunch. Older kids can prepare "box dinners," getting help cooking the ground meat, if necessary. We live in an age of "convenience foods" created for busy people! These are a boon to people with disabilities because they're quick and easy.

Physical changes in the kitchen can make the difference between success and failure. A step-stool can help someone reach the stove, sink, or pantry. An angled mirror behind the stove (like in grocery store produce departments) can help someone who uses a wheelchair see what's bubbling in the pot on the stove. A toaster oven on the counter may be easier to use than a traditional oven. If a person has difficulty cutting or stirring, check out kitchen stores or specialty catalogs (often geared to the "senior population") for things like cutting boards with a knife-holder and other helpful tools.

If reading and/or following written instructions on boxed meals or frozen food packages is difficult, copy the directions onto plain paper, using large print and/or symbols (such as drawing a picture of the oven's temperature gauge showing what the setting should be for fish sticks), if necessary. If using symbols, "tell the story" of how to prepare that food. Make one of these instruction pages for each type of

food, insert each page into a plastic sheet protector, and place in a three-ring notebook.

My son, Benjamin, loves chicken nuggets and fish sticks. To help him learn to be more self-sufficient, we (with Benj helping) first divide the contents of big frozen food packages into individual portion sizes in small freezer bags. Benj can then open one small bag, pour the contents onto the toaster oven pan, and cook his own lunch. Today, we help Benj with many tasks in the kitchen. Some he'll be able to learn to do by himself; others he may not. Those he *cannot* do alone, he'll either learn to do without, do it a different way, or he'll get little bits of help, when needed, from a roommate, friend, or neighbor.

You might be thinking, "Yes, but..." Sorry—YES, BUTS are not allowed! This is too important to so easily dismiss as "impossible." Can't we presume competence and believe the person can learn? You may be thinking a child with autism, for example, doesn't have the attention span to learn to cook. She may not, *if* you try to teach her to cook the way you cook (if that way doesn't work for her), or *if* it's food she doesn't like, or *if* you try to teach her when she'd rather be doing something else! But if the opportunity to prepare her favorite food comes at the right time, and if you make it exciting and fun (and be patient), she'll learn!

Start small, keep it simple, and expect success. Experiment to find what works best. Dispense with methods you typically use if they don't work for the person who's learning. Brainstorm with others, especially with the person you're helping. Visit "kitchen stores" to see some of the helpful new products available. Expect changes as the person grows, learns more, wants to try new things, etc. And expect messes, then help the emerging chef learn to clean up!

A person might need accommodations, some help, or a different way of doing things—but meal preparation *is* doable if *we* do what it takes to help a person learn! If the "She can't cook," benchmark has (or will be) a barrier to a person's dream of living her own life, in her own place, can we afford *not* to do whatever it takes?