

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

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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.

Once upon a time, I scoured a wide variety of “special” catalogs and visited durable medical equipment dealers on a regular basis to find items that could be helpful to my son. I was frequently dismayed, however, by the cost of these specialty items (insurance doesn't pay for everything!) or by the minimal selection offered. But I found a solution: I started looking for things—with a new set of eyes—at Target, Radio Shack, The Dollar Store, and a variety of other “regular” stores and catalogs! And, oh, what an abundant supply I found!

Trying to turn the knob on a traditional table lamp is difficult for Benjamin. A “touch pad” I found at a discount store provided an inexpensive (\$12.00) solution. The lamp is plugged into a box, the box is plugged into the wall. A thin cord leads from the box to the touch pad—a small gold disk that sits on the end table. With a touch of the finger, Benj can turn the lamp on or off. (Table lamps with a built-in “touch” feature—a metal base—can be found in many department stores.)

The tall “torch lamp” in his bedroom (the kind with a small round knob on the pole) was another barrier to Benj's interdependence. First, he couldn't turn the knob. We considered plugging the lamp into the outlet which is controlled by the wall switch just inside his door. That would enable him to turn the light on when he went into his room, but he wouldn't be able to turn it off after he finished reading in bed each night (he can't get out of bed by himself). The solution was a voice-activated control box (about

\$30.00 at discount/hardware stores and on the Internet). Again, the lamp's plug is inserted into a control box, and that box is plugged into the wall. Benj says, “Light commander!” The box emits a beep in response, then Benj says, “Light off [or on],” and his wish is fulfilled! Now, he can stay up in bed long past the time his Dad and I are asleep, and can turn his light off by himself.

Benj spends a great deal of time at the computer. But when it froze up, he couldn't reach around the back to turn the master switch off and on. My husband found a switch console at Radio Shack that solved this dilemma. He was able to plug the computer and two lamps into the console's outlet box. He placed the “other end” of this device on Benjamin's desk next to the computer. Benj can now restart the frozen computer by himself, and can also control the lights in that room. This switch console could be helpful in any room of the house or in an office.

We replaced the traditional wall switches in our home with the “rocker” switches that are easier for all of us to use. Wall switches can also be easily lowered, or a plastic rod that hangs parallel to the wall can be attached. These accommodations can be helpful to people who use wheelchairs, individuals of short stature, or folks with limited finger dexterity.

At some point—either in our family home or in Benj's own place when he moves out on his own—we may look into one of the more sophisticated environmental control unit (ECU) systems which can control just about anything and everything in a home

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or office. For now, however, the low-tech, inexpensive devices I've described work just fine.

When Benj was a preschooler, he—like all kids—sometimes needed comfort during the night. Since he couldn't get out of bed by himself, he wasn't able to wander into the den to find us or climb into our bed. We had, of course, used a "baby monitor" with both of our children when they were very young. But we wanted to help Benj learn to *tell us* what he needed instead of simply crying for help, and we wanted to be able to respond to him, as in me saying, "Daddy's on his way . . ." when it was my husband's turn to help! An inexpensive 3-way intercom from Radio Shack did the trick. One was placed on the table next to Benjamin's bed, one was hung on the wall in the den, and one rotated to our bedroom, our daughter's bedroom, or the living room, depending on the situation. Not only did the intercom system meet our family's needs, it was also fun! The kids (and their friends) had a great time playing "radio" and other imaginary games on the intercom.

We've happily discovered a wide variety of other helpful items in "regular" stores. At Radio Shack, we found a talking calculator (with large buttons and a large display) which helped Benj with math, and a digital talking clock that made telling time a fun learning activity.

The small control buttons on many clock radios are impossible for some folks to operate. We found one suitable for Benj that featured large buttons *and* a large display at Wal-Mart. And after a little comparison shopping at various electronic stores, we found a CD player that was the right size for Benj to handle (a small one) that had large, easy-to-use buttons. Now he can listen to his favorite music without needing help from anyone.

Our next purchase will most likely be a keyless entry system, available for about \$100.00 at hardware stores and on the Internet. A numbered touch pad is

used instead of a key. Then none of us will have to fumble with getting a key into the front door! Remote control door openers are also available, as are those thingamajigs (attached at the top of the door) to help open/close doors—especially helpful for people who use mobility devices.

And speaking of doors, we replaced all the round door knobs in our home with lever door knobs. These are easier for everyone: when my arms are full of groceries, I can open the front door with my elbow!

When we did some home remodeling, we widened all the doors in our home to 36 inches, making it easier for Benj to get around (and also easier to move furniture). If tearing out part of the wall and reframing the door isn't an option, you can still widen a doorway by replacing the original hinges with offset hinges. These "widen" the doorway about two inches when the door is fully open via the "offset." Look for these at home/hardware stores.

Some pretty fancy bath/shower chairs can be found at durable medical supply companies. And these may be necessary for some folks. But we've found lawn/patio chairs work fine for our son. A ceiling lift/track system gets him from his bed to the bathroom, and he can lower himself into a \$10.00 plastic patio chair for his shower. A piece of foam rubber for the seat and back completes the picture! When traveling, we carry a folding canvas camp chair, instead of hoping the hotel will have a suitable bath chair. The camp chair fits in the tub, dries fast, and doesn't rust.

There are many great "specialty" products that are helpful to individuals with disabilities—and I'm glad we have those! But in many cases, with a little shopping savvy and persistence, we can find useful, easy-to-use, inexpensive solutions in neighborhood stores that can change the world for children and adults with disabilities, and other members of the family, too!