



The Prepared Environment

“Pretend that you just found out that you’ll have to be in a wheelchair for a year, possibly longer. What adjustment would you have to make to your home to accommodate this change? This week crawl around your house, through every room, and make a list of changes that you would make. That’s your homework. See you next week.”

Off I went on my hands and knees, antennae up. The things we do as parents. As I crawled, though, I developed some insight into what it might be like to be small and not able to take care of myself.

On the floor, it was not pretty. My kitchen was a dark canyon, with workspace out of reach. Food and dishes were in the upper cabinets. The refrigerator was inaccessible. Unless I tilted my head way back, there was nothing attractive to see. All my favorite art posters looked distorted from this vantage point.

The dining room was a forest of chair legs. The living room was easier to maneuver, but the couches and chairs were impossible to climb into without standing up. The coffee table and end tables were at a dangerous and eye-poking height.

In the bedroom, I couldn’t get into bed by myself. I couldn’t open my dresser or the closet doors. In the bathroom, I couldn’t climb onto the toilet, reach the sink, or easily get into the bathtub, much less adjust the showerhead. I snagged my pants on the transition piece between the bathroom and hallway.

Negotiating the steps to the garage was treacherous. The trip

was rough and dusty, and my hands, along with my clothes, got filthy. The stairs off our wood deck were steep and full of splinters.

Dirty. That was my overall impression of crawling around. With weekly cleaning, I considered my home to be tidy. On my four-legged journey, I discovered grimy lower cabinets, crumbs in the corners, fuzz balls, scribbling under the dining room table (which still surprises me to this day) and splattered windows.

The only objects of interest on this expedition were a bowl and magazines on the coffee table. Pictures and mirrors were hung too high to have any esthetic impact. Doorknobs and light switches were unreachable. The floor was cold and the thermostat might as well been on Mt. Everest. Food and drink were invisible. In my home, I discovered a lowland where I wouldn’t want to live. My children were going to spend many years in this land under the table.

Our next parenting session focused on preparing a child friendly environment. Crawling along four months pregnant with our second daughter opened my eyes about creating a special place for our children. A child friendly environment would give my children a home where they could live in dignity and tranquility while learning to manage independently on their own, along with having their own space to work and have meaningful experiences. Experiences beyond finding fuzz balls in the corners.

My husband and I moved the dishes in the kitchen to lower cabinets and found a shelf for snacks. We installed a bottled water dispenser, so our toddler could get her own water easily. We put a small table with chairs in our kitchen and set up a low shelf with puzzles, blocks and other activities.

In the living room we removed the sharp cornered tables and found a Japanese style square coffee table. We added floor pillows, lowered our artwork, put extenders on our light switches and added interesting touchable items to the room, such as woodcarvings, and baskets of dominoes and wooden blocks.

In the bathroom we added a plastic step stool that our one-year-old could move to wash her hands, and later brush her teeth and reach the toilet.

In the girls’ bedroom, we placed a twin mattress on the floor, and bought a light comforter so Dana could learn to make the bed herself. We removed the closet doors and added lower shelving and rods so the girls could hang up their own clothes and dress themselves.

Of course, we also childproofed cabinets, electrical outlets and moved the “untouchables” to higher cabinets or closets.

These are a few of the efforts we made to prepare a home for our daughters, now in their own homes. To paraphrase a Zen proverb: The journey of a thousand smiles begins with a single crawl.