Pull-Out Steps for Vanity Counters

by Dan Nesovic

In my early years as a remodeling contractor, I was so preoccupied with business decisions that it was difficult to stop and ask myself why I did any specific task the way I did. In my fourth full year in business, however, I had a special request from a client that prompted me to make a serious effort regularly to ask myself, Why am I doing it like this? Since then, asking why has become a habit from which I have benefited greatly.

"Standard" counter height. The clients' request had to do with bathroom countertop heights. At 6 feet 7 inches tall, most countertops are too low for me, whether they're in the bathroom or the kitchen. My clients, however, were 5 feet 6 inches and 4 feet 11 inches tall. After completing a kitchen remodel for them, they asked me to do their bathrooms and insisted on only one design prerequisite: The countertops had to be 36 inches tall, the same as their kitchen.

Never having had that request before, I asked them why. They looked up at me, smiled, and explained that even though they looked at the world from a much lower perspective than I do, they found the standard bathroom counter height of 32 inches far too low. They did not like having to bend over to brush their teeth, wash their face, or simply turn on the water. I couldn't argue with them, because I really didn't know why bath counters are built that low. I had always done it that way because that's the way everyone else did it.

I found that the 32-inch counter height for bathrooms comes from ergonometric research done in the 1930s and '40s at the University of Illinois. The studies developed all our current cabinet and counter standards for kitchens and baths. All these standards were developed for a typical (at that time) two-bedroom one-bath home of 1,200 square feet. Because the single bath had to be used by all members of the family, the heights of children as well as adults were used to derive the averaged, or factored, final height.

Anyone who has kids can tell you that even 32 inches is too tall for the average three to five-year-old, who is nevertheless capable of washing his or her own hands. But by the time a kid is eight years old, the kitchen faucet is within reach. It seems that our entire bathroom counter height standard is based on the decision to lower the counter to accommodate children for about three years of their life, while ignoring their earlier and later years.

That just doesn't make sense to me. Countertops and the cabinets that hold them up are considered permanent and relatively expensive elements of any bath. To me, it makes far more sense to build counters and cabinets at a height comfortable to more people for a longer term of their life, and make other accommodations for children. Because children don't weigh much in their early years, it's easy and inexpensive to contrive ways to help them reach and use a 36-inch counter.

Today, this can easily be accom-

Figure 1. *By standing on this step stool from Rev-A-Shelf, a child can easily reach the sink in a 36-inch-high vanity. When folded, the stool takes up just over 3 inches of cabinet depth.*

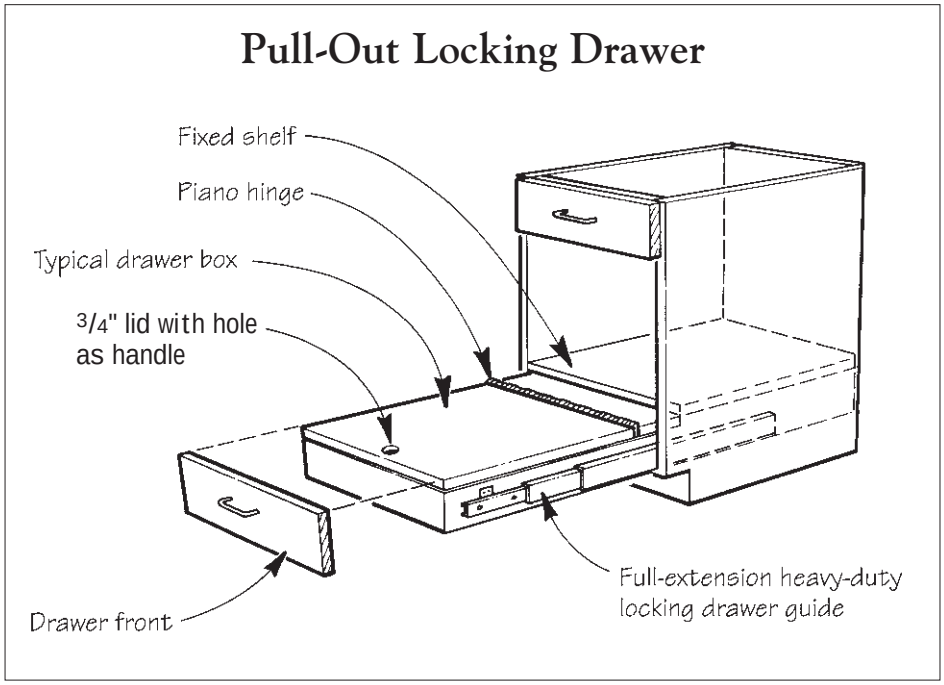

Figure 2. *A shallow lidded drawer mounted on heavy-duty locking slides can serve as a step.*

plished by installing a fold-down step stool that attaches to the back of the sink cabinet door. Rev-A-Shelf (2409 Plantside Dr., Jeffersontown, KY 40299; 800/626-1126), a manufacturer of cabinet accessories, has recently made this product, called the "Hide-A-Step," available for $40 to $50 wholesale. It comes in two colors — white and natural wood — and two sizes, 10 1/4 and 11 1/2 inches, measured from floor to top of step (see Figure 1). In the folded-up position, the step stool takes up only 3 1/8 inches of space inside the cabinet. It operates easily, and effectively lowers a 36-inch counter to either 25 3/4 or 24 1/2 inches, depending on the model. This step stool can also be used in kitchens to help children reach the sink or a work counter, and adults can use them to access tall storage cabinets.

Before I used the Hide-A-Step, I most often used a free-standing movable step stool made of plastic, one that's available in most department stores. I have also made more elaborate and permanent modifications to cabinets that accomplish the same task. My favorite is to add drawer to the bottom of the sink cabinet. (I do this regularly in small baths, anyway, for extra storage.) This drawer is equipped with heavy-duty locking slides, so the drawer locks in place when opened (Figure 2). On top of the drawer is a lid which, when the drawer is opened and locked in place, forms a platform that raises a child standing on it about 10 1/2 inches off the floor. The lid is hinged for access to stored items. I use a locking slide available from Accuride (12311 S. Shoemaker Ave., Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670; 310/903-0200). The only drawback is that I have not yet found a locking slide that is easy to unlock. Another option is to add a device similar to a pull-out bread board to the bottom of the cabinet. This pull-out step should have a stop on it so that it never pulls out more than halfway, to maintain the leverage needed to safely support the weight of a child. The pull-out can be mounted just above the toe kick for a 6-inch step or again above a drawer at about 11 1/2 inches off the floor.

The only reason to leave a bath counter at 32 inches (for nonimpaired individuals) is if the bath design favors a sit-down vanity attached to the main sink counter. It looks better if the counter is all one height, rather than having a step down for the vanity. There is a simple solution to this dilemma. Instead of using a chair that requires a 30- to 32-inch counter, use a stool made for a 36-inch counter. You can then maintain the continuous counter. ■

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