Frequently Asked Questions

Do all nonspeakers have the ability to use the letter board?

I think that the majority of autistics should be able to communicate using the Spelling2Communicate (S2C) method if given the chance. I am always going to believe that if given support and encouragement we can do most anything. Did I ever think I would be the author of 3 books? Not I did not, but I am! You are not going to lose anything by trying, but the payoff is better than you can ever imagine. --- Gregory Tino

What's the hardest thing about learning the alphabet board?

The most challenging part of learning the letterboard was the motor control needed to point to the letters. Spelling to Communicate uses gross motor movement which makes this method successful for those with apraxia. It was hard to do in the beginning, but practice and determination made it the best thing I ever did! --- Sarah Ackerman

Why is the alphabet board better than other alternatives?

The alphabet board, what we call a letterboard, is the ideal tool for us nonspeakers. It is designed with our neurologic differences in mind. Apraxia affects not only our mouths but also our eyes and hands.

Everyone knows the sequence of the letters of the alphabet, so this ABC array of letters is easy for beginners to use. Use of individual letters as the building blocks of communication allows us to readily say whatever we want. It is simple and inexpensive to produce multiple versions of the letterboard which change from larger targets that are widely spaced to smaller targets that are closer together. This progression of size and spacing makes early success more attainable for beginners who are working hard to achieve motor accuracy of pointing, focus, and emotional self-regulation. Skill on the smallest letterboard enables us to transition to the use of a keyboard to spell our thoughts, like the QWERTY one I used to write this. --- Ben Crimm

Other methods are not as effective for us. Sign language for more than a few wants and needs is impossible for people with apraxia. Methods that use words and phrases as the building blocks of communication inevitably limit the vocabulary options and what we can say. Cards with words and icons on them are limited to a vocabulary of just several hundred words. Apps with words and icons on them also limit vocabulary and generally do not permit flexibility in both size and spacing of targets. These AAC methods do not accommodate our desire to say anything we want along with our motor needs. --- Ben Crimm

Why does someone need to hold the board? And why can't the board sit on a stand in front of you?

This is a good question.

The answer lies in our motor planning difficulties. we have a lot of things to work through in regard to our purposeful motor (accurate pointing) and our sensory integration. Maintaining concentration can get tricky depending on the environment. Sometimes we get wrapped into the stimuli of the environment and need someone to help us refocus. A trusted CRP helps with that by knowing whether to keep the board in front of us or resetting the board when we lose focus.

We cannot have the board on a stand because we often get lost in ourselves. the CRP is trained to know when to reset the board, which is intended to also reset our focus. Additionally, our eye muscles are not very strong, and they fatigue easily. Therefore, those resets help maintain our stamina throughout sessions because they allow our eyes to rest. If the board is stationery on a stand – it is a struggle for us to look away, hence, we do not get the opportunity to rest our eyes. --- Brian Foti

How did it feel once you learned the Spelling to Communicate method?

I felt happy because I began to communicate and express what was previously trapped inside my mind. I feel relieved that my family knows me better now. --- Will Stephanou

How does your communication partner help you while you are spelling?

My communication partner does wonders. At times my partner knows when I will become dysregulated before it happens. My CRP holds my devices for me at the moment, but honestly if they didn't, I would struggle immensely. My CRP keeps me regulated and focused while I am spelling. Prompts such as "Keep going" or "Eyes!" or "You got it" really help keep me going. When I am not spelling, my CRP makes sure that my body stays busy doing something. That could involve a sticker by number activity or even just some deep pressure squeezes. --- Matthew Cramer

Are there schools that support S2C? How did you find them?

My mother found the Talk School through much research. This school is specific to educating students with apraxia, which was critical for my education. The Talk School is supportive of S2C because they presume competence. The Talk School allowed me to learn with whichever communication method best fit my needs and goals. I hope schools begin to provide devices and new methods of testing that accurately portray our intelligence. It is critical for society to understand non speakers are the same as everyone else. We are all equal. I hope that society doesn't just accept nonspeakers but celebrates them. --- Vince Rinicella

How are you using S2C in your school setting?

S2C has allowed me to not only express myself but also become top of my class in every subject. I am able to voice my thoughts, share my opinions, conversate with my peers, and even order what I'd like for lunch. S2C has expanded my education allowing me to take courses more up my speed. I am an honor student, and all of my peers and teachers respect me for my words, or letters, rather than my bodily actions. --- Matthew Cramer

My school district has not provided opportunities for people who need CRPs to make their voices heard, but recently my school offered us the chance to bring a CRP to school, so my mother is coming to some of my classes so I can spell there. --- Will Stephanou

How are SEEN and S2C organizations trying to change the mindsets of critics?

We understand that some people have raised concerns about the authenticity of this method of communication, meaning that they question whether the words and ideas that the nonspeaker spells are really their own, or are they those of the person holding the letterboard.

First of all, we recognize the real possibility that poorly trained individuals who take on the role of being a communication regulation partner (CRP), could substitute their own ideas in place of the nonspeaker's or provide improper assistance such as telling them what letters to point to. This is inherent in any coaching situation. Think about a driving instructor in a dual-control vehicle. The instructor could use their controls too much, and not let the learner use the brakes and gas pedal. So, rigorous training of CRPs and faithful adherence to the methodology are essential.

While it is true that 30 years ago some unethical people did substitute their thoughts for those of nonspeakers while using a slightly different method of communication support, it is unreasonable to ban ethically performed communication support for all time. We continue to use police, physicians, and various types of therapists despite a few bad actors in these jobs. Society establishes rigorous training, codes of conduct, and methods of review of substandard performance, with appropriate remediation and other consequences.

Second, many of the people who question this method have never taken the opportunity to have a conversation, face to face, with some fully proficient letterboard or keyboard users. They have not done their own first-hand research. Instead, they are relying on research conducted decades ago that used very small sample sizes and that had significant methodological flaws.

Published research takes time and will come in due course. There is already an eye-tracking study that confirms that nonspeakers' eye gaze moves to the letters on the alphabet board before finger pointing just as quickly as it does in other people. We need more such research on many aspects of the new knowledge being discovered by trailblazing nonspeakers and their CRPs.

Third, there are numerous examples of nonspeakers reporting symptoms to doctors which resulted in important, and sometimes lifesaving, diagnoses being made and treated. This includes symptoms which are invisible to others, unlike a cough, which other people can report on.

Finally, the truth about harm to nonspeakers is that we are many times more likely to be abused, both physically and sexually, as disabled people who can communicate. The real harm is in not giving us the tools to have agency in our lives. --- Ben Crimm