

Autism National Committee (AutCom) Position Paper

Right to Communicate for People with Limited or No Speech

It is the policy of Autism National Committee that everyone has something to say and a right to say it. People choosing to use any method of communication by typing, spelling or pointing must be given full consideration and respect. This includes people who do not speak or do not speak reliably, consistently, and effectively at all times.

This position paper includes approaches known as Supported Communication or Supported Typing, Typing to Communicate, Facilitated Communication Training (FCT), Rapid Prompting Method (RPM), and Spelling to Communicate (S2C). These and similar approaches with different names are accepted and valid ways in which autistics and others may learn to exercise their right to say what they have to say fully and effectively and to be heard.

“It is hard enough to live in silence without anybody or anything making it harder or more uncomfortable.” Sharisa Joy Kochmeister, Former AutCom President

PRINCIPLES:

- 1. Communication is a right, not a privilege.**
2. All people have a right to communicate using their chosen method(s), and their communication must be heard and respected by others.
3. People with disabilities of all ages (including autistics) who do not communicate effectively, meaningfully, and consistently through speech must have an available means of communication that allows their fullest participation in the world. This includes access to a system that allows expression beyond wants and needs.
4. Children whose oral language is either absent or delayed for any reason must have access to any and all forms of communication that allow them to communicate meaningfully in age-appropriate ways by 18 months of age.
5. People using any method to communicate have an absolute right to access it, and people who do not have a full and effective means of communication have a

right to the opportunity to explore one or more of these approaches. People who are denied access to whichever types of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) they choose are denied their basic rights because communication is the basis of all other rights and the means by which those rights can be realized.

6. Literacy must be taught to all students regardless of the apparent severity of their disability. This is particularly true for autistic students, whose complex movement, anxiety, connectivity, and sensory differences may preclude their demonstrating their abilities in conventional ways. However, the individual does not have to demonstrate literacy before being introduced to any of these approaches to communication. Demonstrated literacy is not a prerequisite.
7. It is essential to presume competence regarding each person's potential to learn. This is particularly true for autistics as well as those with other challenges involving communication. To be precise, cognitive potential should always be presumed to exist, and a rigorous, systematic, and long-term commitment is required in order to enable each person to have full and effective communication of their choice.
8. The primary goal of any approach to communication is always for individuals to achieve full and effective autonomous communication. However, given the complexity of challenges faced by individuals, total independence in communication and in demonstrating literacy may not be possible at all times and for every single person.
9. Anyone attempting to introduce any of the approaches that this position paper particularly addresses as a training process for communication must have a solid foundation of training in that method. Coaching and mentoring by experienced practitioners in these methods are essential parts of the learning process for new communication partners. Those who provide training to communication partners, the communication partners themselves, and spellers/typers require and must be provided on-going training, supervision, and support.
10. Additionally, communication partners must adhere to strict standards in order to minimize partner influence on spelled/typed messages (which AutCom acknowledges may occur) and to assure that all communication is generated and owned by the speller/typer. Intentionally guiding or prompting a speller/typer to a target in open responses or open communication is unacceptable under any and all circumstances.
11. As in speech, not everything a person types is what was intended or clear. Clarification is essential.

12. Funding must be available for communication partners, ongoing training, and the communication device(s) each individual requires to communicate fully and effectively.
13. People with disabilities who use multimodal or alternative forms of communication should be active and proactive at the local, state, national and global levels in shaping policies and practices of government agencies, professional organizations, and other entities that directly affect their lives. Spelling/typing methods for communication must be accepted in policy and practice as an equal choice among AAC opportunities.
14. Methods of spelling and typing for communication may involve multiple forms of support provided by the communication partner. This support will be highly individualized based on the specific, changing, and often fluid, needs of the speller/typer. Consequently, the process of spelling/typing does not look the same from person to person. There is a wide diversity of supports and styles of pointing to targets involved, and there is no single rote prescription of how to introduce or use such methods.
15. Pointing, spelling, or typing to communicate, and other forms of AAC, may reveal competencies, feelings, and thoughts that were previously unexpressed. We also affirm that all individuals possess unique gifts and strengths whether or not they need access to some type of support or educational method to allow them to communicate those gifts and strengths.
16. Communication partner influence is not an insurmountable obstacle to the responsible and dependable use of spelling and typing to communicate. Message-passing in everyday life (in which the speller/typer communicates information not known to the facilitator) is a straightforward way of verifying a message's validity.
17. AutCom asserts unequivocally that there is nothing mystical, magical, miraculous or mythical about communication by spelling/typing. Indeed, use of these approaches is very difficult and challenging work for spellers/typers and their communication partners.

“As for FC, it is a tool I use to get where I wish to go. Just as a voice is used by those who speak.” – Jenn Seybert

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