Understanding Rapid Prompting Method (RPM) – A Parent's Guide

A Parent's Guide to the Method, Letter Boards, Research, and Questions Families Should Ask

For families of nonspeaking or minimally speaking autistic individuals, communication can raise important questions.

- **How much does my child understand?**
- **Is speech the only reliable way to demonstrate understanding?**
- **What role do motor planning and regulation play in communication?**
- **Could pointing to letters provide another pathway for expression?**

Rapid Prompting Method, commonly called **RPM**, is an educational approach developed around questions like these. It uses age-appropriate lessons, structured prompting, purposeful responding, and, as skills develop, pointing to letters as a means of communication.

RPM is based in part on the idea that an individual's ability to reliably produce speech or purposeful movement may not fully reflect what that individual understands.

For many families and practitioners, this distinction is significant.

Research involving nonspeaking autistic individuals continues to examine the relationships among speech, motor planning, cognition, agency, and communication. RPM and assisted letter-board communication are also subjects of professional debate, particularly around prompting, independence, and authorship.

This guide is designed to help families understand **what RPM is, how letter boards may be used, what emerging research suggests, and what thoughtful questions families can ask when exploring communication support.**

What Is Rapid Prompting Method?

Rapid Prompting Method was developed by **Soma Mukhopadhyay** as a teaching approach for autistic and other individuals whose ability to communicate reliably through speech may be limited.

RPM generally follows a **teach-ask structure**.

An instructor presents age-appropriate educational information and then asks the learner questions related to the material. Early responses may involve selecting between written choices. As purposeful pointing develops, the learner may progress toward additional choices and eventually toward selecting individual letters to spell responses.

RPM can incorporate verbal, visual, auditory, and sometimes tactile prompting to support attention, engagement, and purposeful responding.

Although letter boards are commonly associated with RPM, it is important to distinguish the two.

A letter board is a communication tool. RPM is a teaching approach that may incorporate that tool.

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Using a letter board does not necessarily mean an individual is practicing RPM.

Why Does RPM Emphasize Purposeful Movement?

One concept underlying RPM is that **knowing an answer and reliably producing the motor response necessary to demonstrate that knowledge may involve different abilities.**

Consider what can be involved in answering a question without speech.

A learner may need to:

- Attend to the question
- Process the information
- Formulate a response
- Visually locate the intended target
- Initiate movement
- Control the arm and hand
- Accurately point
- Sequence additional movements to continue the response

For many people, these processes happen so automatically that we rarely consider them separately.

For individuals experiencing significant challenges with motor planning, regulation, or purposeful movement, the relationship between **intention and action** may be more complex.

RPM therefore emphasizes developing purposeful responding and motor control while providing age-appropriate educational opportunities.

The underlying question is important:

Could difficulty reliably demonstrating knowledge be different from difficulty understanding?

Research involving nonspeaking autistic individuals continues to explore that distinction.

What Does an RPM Session Look Like?

RPM sessions are individualized, but instruction typically centers around age-appropriate educational content.

An instructor might present a lesson involving science, history, literature, geography, mathematics, current events, or another subject and periodically ask questions about what has been taught.

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Early in the process, a learner might be presented with two written choices.

For example:

Which planet do we live on?

- **EARTH / MARS**

The learner works on purposefully selecting the intended response.

As skills develop, the number and complexity of choices may increase. Some learners eventually progress toward selecting individual letters to construct words and increasingly complex responses.

This progression is important.

RPM is not simply placing an alphabet board in front of someone and asking an open-ended question.

It is a teaching process that can involve **educational content, attention, regulation, purposeful movement, motor planning, literacy, and repeated practice.**

How Are Letter Boards Used in RPM?

A letter board provides a means of responding without requiring spoken language.

Instead of speaking an answer, a learner can point sequentially to letters to construct a response.

Doing so can involve multiple skills working together:

- Visual attention
- Motor planning
- Purposeful pointing
- Sequencing
- Literacy
- Sustained attention
- Regulation
- Increasingly precise movement

As skills develop, the goal is to support increasingly purposeful and independent communication.

For some learners, that development may take considerable time and practice. Progress will not look the same for every individual.

Letter-board communication is a skill-building process, not a quick fix or guaranteed outcome.

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RPM, Letter Boards & AAC: What's the Difference?

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they mean different things.

- **AAC — Augmentative and Alternative Communication**

  AAC is a broad category encompassing many ways of communicating in addition to or instead of speech.

  AAC may include gestures, signs, picture-based systems, communication applications, speech-generating devices, keyboards, and letter boards.

- **Letter Board**

  A letter board is a tool containing letters that an individual can select to construct written responses.

  Letter boards may be used within different communication or educational approaches.

- **RPM — Rapid Prompting Method**

  RPM is a specific teaching approach involving educational lessons, structured prompting, purposeful responding, and potentially the use of letter boards.

  A person can use a letter board without using RPM, and letter boards represent only one of many possible communication tools.

Understanding these distinctions can help families make more informed decisions about communication support.

Research & Emerging Evidence

Research into nonspeaking autism and communication continues to expand.

An important area of study concerns the relationship between **speech, motor ability, cognition, agency, and communication**.

Historically, an individual's inability to provide a reliable spoken or motor response could make it difficult to determine what that person understood.

Researchers are increasingly examining whether conventional measures may fail to capture some abilities among individuals with substantial speech and motor differences.

Letter-board communication has become part of that research conversation.

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Eye-Tracking and Intentional Movement

A 2020 study published in *Scientific Reports*, a Nature Portfolio journal, used eye-tracking technology to examine nine nonspeaking autistic individuals who communicated by pointing to letters on a board.

Researchers examined an intriguing question:

Where were participants looking immediately before they pointed?

The researchers found that participants generally looked toward letters before physically pointing to them.

These anticipatory eye movements were consistent with participants visually identifying intended targets and then planning movements toward those letters.

The findings provide objective behavioral evidence consistent with **purposeful visual and motor planning** among the individuals studied.

The study is important because it attempted to examine communication using measurable behavior rather than relying solely on observation or testimony.

It also has limitations.

The study involved a small number of experienced letter-board users and did not establish the effectiveness of RPM itself as an intervention. Nor does one study establish that every message produced through every form of assisted letter-board communication is independently authored.

Instead, the findings contribute to a developing body of research examining agency and intentional communication among nonspeaking autistic individuals.

What Does Research Specifically on RPM Suggest?

Research specifically evaluating RPM remains developing.

A 2024 exploratory study followed **12 minimally verbal autistic participants through eight RPM sessions**.

Researchers reported significant increases in response accuracy and decreases in repetitive behaviors over the course of the sessions.

These findings add to the questions researchers are investigating regarding RPM, learning, regulation, and purposeful responding.

However, the study was non-experimental, involved a small number of participants, and could not establish that RPM itself caused the observed changes.

The researchers also identified the need for additional study, including research addressing authorship.

This is an important feature of responsible research:

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Promising findings create reasons to investigate further—not reasons to stop asking questions.

Why Is RPM Debated?

RPM has generated significant discussion within the autism, communication, and speech-language fields.

Much of the debate centers on the role of prompting and the importance of establishing that communication produced through a letter board reflects the individual's intended message.

This raises an important question:

Who is authoring the communication?

When another person presents or holds a board or provides prompts, researchers and practitioners must consider whether that individual could unintentionally influence a response through movement, positioning, visual cues, expectations, or other forms of prompting.

Some professional organizations, including the **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)**, currently recommend against RPM, citing concerns about the available evidence, prompt dependency, and authorship.

Supporters of RPM point to the experiences of nonspeaking communicators and their families, clinical and educational observations, and emerging research examining agency, motor planning, cognition, and letter-board communication.

These differing perspectives make continued rigorous research particularly important.

Families deserve to understand both the emerging evidence and the professional debate.

What Does "Presuming Competence" Mean?

Families exploring RPM and letter-board communication frequently encounter the phrase **presume competence**.

At its best, presuming competence means refusing to assume that difficulty speaking proves an inability to understand, think, learn, or participate.

It means providing age-respectful educational opportunities.

It means speaking to the individual rather than around them.

It means recognizing that expressive limitations can make cognitive ability difficult to assess.

And it means remaining open to the possibility that an individual's ability to demonstrate knowledge may not perfectly reflect what that individual understands.

Presuming competence does **not** require abandoning critical thinking.

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Families can believe that an individual deserves dignity, rich educational opportunities, and access to communication while still asking thoughtful questions about prompting, independence, evidence, and authorship.

Those principles do not have to conflict.

In fact:

Protecting an individual's authorship is part of respecting that individual's communication.

Questions Parents Should Ask

Parents do not need to become researchers before exploring RPM or letter-board communication.

But informed questions can help families understand how instruction is being provided and how progress is being evaluated.

Consider asking:

- What is the goal of instruction?
- How will purposeful pointing be developed?
- What types of prompting will be used?
- How will prompting change as skills develop?
- Is the communication partner holding or moving the board?
- How is greater independence encouraged?
- How will progress be measured?
- What other communication or AAC options are available?
- How will prompted responses be distinguished from increasingly independent responses?
- How are unexpected responses handled?
- How is the individual's authorship respected and protected?

That last group of questions matters.

Authentic communication includes more than correct answers.

It can include disagreement.

Mistakes.

Unexpected ideas.

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Humor.

Uncertainty.

Refusal.

Questions.

And opinions the communication partner did not anticipate.

The goal should not simply be producing the "right" answer. The goal is increasingly meaningful communication belonging to the individual communicating.

A Thoughtful Approach to Emerging Research

Families of nonspeaking individuals can encounter dramatically different messages about RPM and letter-board communication.

Some advocates describe profound changes they have witnessed.

Some professionals remain strongly skeptical.

Researchers continue asking questions about motor planning, cognition, prompting, agency, independence, and authorship.

Families should not have to choose between unquestioning acceptance and automatic dismissal.

Research specifically establishing RPM's effectiveness remains limited, and important questions remain unresolved.

At the same time, emerging research involving nonspeaking autistic individuals continues to examine assumptions about the relationships among **speech, motor ability, cognition, and communication**.

That research deserves continued rigorous investigation.

At Beyond Words, we believe families benefit from an approach that combines **presuming competence with thoughtful, individualized practice and continued attention to emerging evidence.**

Important questions remain.

Those questions are reasons for careful research and thoughtful practice—not reasons to underestimate the potential of nonspeaking individuals.

Communication Is the Goal

At Beyond Words, our starting point is simple:

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Every individual deserves meaningful opportunities to communicate.

Our goal is not to change who an individual is or promise a particular communication outcome.

It is to support **learning, purposeful communication, self-expression, and increasing independence** while respecting each learner's individual strengths and needs.

For some families, exploring communication through letter boards and RPM-informed instruction may be part of that process.

The most meaningful measure of progress is not whether a particular method "wins" a debate.

It is whether the individual gains increasingly reliable, meaningful, and authentic opportunities to communicate.

Learn More

Beyond Words Neurodiversity provides individualized Communication Support for nonspeaking and minimally speaking individuals and their families.

Schedule a Discovery Consultation at:

BeyondWordsNeurodiversity.com

Research & Further Reading

Jaswal, V. K., Wayne, A., & Golino, H. (2020).
Eye-tracking reveals agency in assisted autistic communication.
Scientific Reports, 10, 7882.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).
Rapid Prompting Method: Position Statement.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).
Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Practice Portal.

This Parent Guide is provided for educational and informational purposes and is not intended as medical, diagnostic, therapeutic, or speech-language pathology advice. Communication needs and approaches are individual, and families should consider appropriate professional guidance when making decisions for their child.

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