

COMMUNICATION CHANGES EVERYTHING FOR AUTISTICS WHO CANNOT SPEAK

Thursday, December 4, 2025 • 6:00PM - 7:00PM

Spellers and Allies Advocacy Network is a group of nonspeaking individuals who use letter boards and keyboards to communicate. They work to increase awareness about nonspeakers abilities and needs, to empower other nonspeakers, and to advocate for change.

OPEN TO ALL – NO FEE TO ATTEND

ABOUT THE SESSION

Less than 1% of nonspeaking autistics (aka nonverbal, level 3 support needs, severe) can say anything they want. Why is this and what can be done about it?

It's a common misconception that autistic people who cannot speak are not able to learn or think for themselves. However, nonspeaking does not mean nonthinking. They have complex thoughts and ideas and understand the full range of human emotions and relationships. They love to learn.

But they cannot execute the motor (muscle) action of their tongues, lips and vocal cords to speak what they want to say with their mouths. Scientists call this apraxia. Nonspeakers call it the brain-body disconnect. They have sensory-motor difficulty, not a cognitive problem.

Due to these erroneous assumptions about them, they are not given an academic education in school and are relegated to life skills instruction in isolated special

education classes. They are not taught the tools they need in order to say anything they want and advocate for themselves.

Nationwide, 800,000 children and 1.6 million adults are nonspeaking. This includes 30% of autistics and approximately 50% of people with Down syndrome, as well as people with many other neurological conditions.

But if they are given the right instruction and the right augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools, nonspeaking autistics and those with other neurologic conditions can learn to say anything they want. They can tell you what they are thinking, get academic education alongside their neurotypical peers, hold jobs, develop deep relationships based on communication, contribute to their communities and advocate for themselves.

The current paradigm of understanding about nonspeakers is wrong and needs to change. Those who can say

anything have the lived experience before and after full communication and have a lot to say about it. They are the true experts about nonspeakers. They want you to understand how to make medical appointments with us most productive.

This session includes a 30 minute presentation followed by a panel discussion with nonspeakers answering your questions and those of the moderator.

Participants will learn:

1. Who is a non speaker?
2. Why can't they speak?
3. How did they learn to communicate and why did other methods they tried not work?
4. What accommodations might be helpful to make healthcare appointments for non speakers most effective?

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS



Ben Grimm is autistic and apraxic and has anxiety. In 2017, when he was 25 years old, he was given the tools to communicate everything he wanted to say- not with his mouth, but by pointing to letters on an alphabet board. He celebrated that first day on the way to full communication as his milestone bonus birthday, because his life was born anew then. It took him more than a year to become proficient enough to carry on conversations with his immediate family and another year to feel comfortable talking with friends and people he did not know.

He is so grateful that now he can tell his family when he has a headache and to talk with them and his therapist about his anxiety. Without that ability, he would not get the treatment and tools that he needs.

He loves to take walks, hike in the woods, take canoe rides, eat good food (he thanks his mom!), listen to his mysteries on audiobooks, Zoom with family, hang out with friends in person and online, and play Scrabble with his Grandma (who he beats only rarely). He currently lives with his mom and dad.

He has a part-time job working as a Non-speaking Coordinator for Spellers and Allies Advocacy Network, the advocacy branch of the International Association for Spelling as Communication. He also works with his nonspeaking colleagues in SEEN (Spellers Empowering Education for Nonspeakers) to raise awareness in the Philadelphia area about the abilities of nonspeakers.

He has a full and rich life with good friends, fulfilling work and a loving family.



Aniruddha Rao, MD is a second-year Internal Medicine resident at the University of Michigan. Since 2019, he has been actively engaged in advocacy for nonspeaking autistic individuals through the Spellers and Allies Advocacy Network, a program of the International Association for Spelling as Communication (I-ASC). His inspiration for this work comes from his cousin, a nonspeaking autistic individual who communicates by spelling words and thoughts on a letterboard. This experience has shaped Aniruddha's commitment to advancing awareness of diverse communication styles within medicine and promoting inclusive, accessible care for all patients. He is particularly passionate about encouraging physicians to presume competence in autistic patients and to recognize and address their health needs beyond the scope of autism.



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Questions?

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