



## Communication Systems – Spelling Boards

by Diane Symons, Speech Pathologist.

Many people experience communication difficulties as a result of injury or neurological conditions such as head injury, stroke or motor neurone disease. A speech pathologist can assist the individual and their family and friends to find ways to improve communication. They may recommend the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

AAC strategies include using written words, spelling boards, picture symbol books, key word signing, and speech generating devices. While there are basic strategies that anyone can try, an effective communication system is as individual as the person who uses it. The AAC system must take into account the person's skills and communication style, their communication partners, the environment/s in which they communicate, and the functions of their communication.

This fact sheet focuses on spelling boards.

To use a spelling board successfully the individual will need to be able to spell effectively. Be aware that although a person may understand what you say to them and be able to read, they may still find spelling difficult and confronting. They may have difficulty thinking of the words they want to use, as well as problems remembering what they were spelling. Look out for signs of frustration or embarrassment and try to set the person at ease. You may need to consult a speech pathologist to find another way of communicating.

Other access methods are possible for people who can not clearly point to the letters on the spelling board. Talk to a speech pathologist and occupational therapist to find out more.

### **Making a spelling board**

You can make a simple, cheap spelling board using paper, pens, cardboard. Laminate it or place in a plastic sleeve for durability. For a more professional looking result use the computer to print a spelling board. Commercial boards are also available.

A speech pathologist can assist you to design and produce a spelling board suited to an individual.

### **Layout and information**

#### **Case and Font**

Generally upper case/capital letters are clearer to see. If printing a spelling board on the computer use a clear large font and allow for adequate "white space" around each letter.

## Use of words and phrases

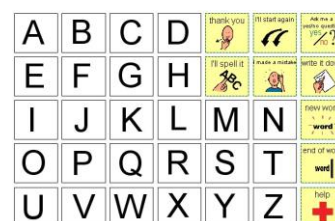
No matter how quick and simple someone might be able to spell out words it is always good to have some quick common words or phrases printed on a communication spelling board.

Suggested phrases include:

- Can you write it down?
- It starts with...
- I'd like to ask you something
- Do you understand?
- I don't understand
- I'll show you
- End of word
- New word
- I made a mistake, I'll start again
- I'm not sure how to spell it
- I need some help
- Thank you
- Yes/No (may be needed if a person can't clearly nod and shake their head)

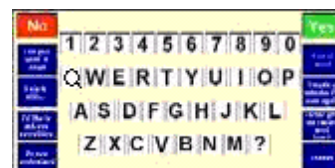
## Alphabetical order

This can be easy to follow and understood by most people, however it can be slow as people tend to start at A and work their way through, rather than visually searching for the letter. An alphabetical layout can be displayed in a range of ways but it may be efficient to split the rows so that each new row starts with a vowel (a,e,i,o,u).



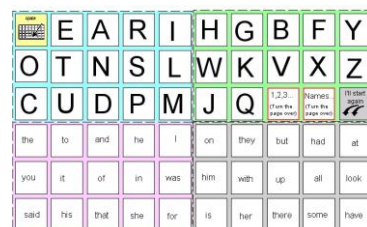
## QWERTY order

People who are familiar with a computer keyboard or typewriter might prefer the QWERTY layout.



## Letter frequency order

Charts arranged by the most frequently used letters take some getting used to. However, once learnt, they can be faster to use and require less movement, and therefore less tiring.



## Hints for being a good communication partner

- As the person selects the letters say them out loud so they know you've understood. You may want to write them down so you can follow along.
- Don't be afraid of saying you don't understand.
- Ask the person if it's okay before guessing and finishing off their words. While it can speed up the conversation, it may frustrate the person, especially if you are on the wrong track.
- "Listen" with your eyes and your ears.
- Find a quiet space to sit and allow plenty of time.
- Be aware that using any form of alternative communication takes time and energy; there will be times that the person just doesn't feel like communicating.
- For quick communication it may be easier to ask questions that the person can answer with a "yes" or "no". Just make sure this is not the only type of communication you use.

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