

REPLY

Independent Typers Exist: A Reply to Letters on Why We Need to Study Assisted Methods to Teach Typing

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Received: 21 April 2026 | **Revised:** 21 April 2026 | **Accepted:** 7 May 2026

Nonspeaking autistic people who type independently (without anyone touching them or the keyboard) exist. In our labs, clinics, and community partnerships, we have gotten to know several. In her letter, Tager-Flusberg writes that she also has “met several nonspeaking autistic people who type independently and communicate effectively.” They have served on the US President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (The White House 2022) and the US Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee 2021). One independent typer was recently accepted to MIT (Rodrigues 2025).

Some independent typers attribute their ability, in part, to the years of motor, sensory, and attentional support an assistant provided as they were learning to type. One goal of our commentary was to highlight how much could be learned from collaborating with now-independent typers. Research on their communication journeys could be useful for helping some other nonspeaking autistic people learn to communicate more effectively. Indeed, a recent National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) workshop report encourages researchers studying communication in nonspeaking autism to “[e]ngage non-speaking individuals and other stakeholders as collaborators at all research stages....” (NIDCD 2023).

Thus, we were surprised that in their letters, two of the organizers of that workshop dismissed the value of stakeholder collaboration when applied to researching assisted methods to teach typing. Tager-Flusberg criticized our “descriptive research program,” and Kasari found it “deeply concerning” that we

suggested postponing a randomized controlled trial (RCT) until we had a better understanding of now-independent typers.

Descriptive research has limits. But it is the foundation of the scientific method and a necessary precursor to more controlled approaches. As Tager-Flusberg noted, we do not even know how many independent typers there are or how long it took them to become independent. A descriptive approach is thus a logical starting point that will inform subsequent experimental research.

We agree with Kasari that interventions should be tested with RCTs. But if the ultimate goal is to develop and test ways to better support nonspeaking autistic people, it is not clear why one would conduct an RCT on an assisted teaching method without first incorporating insights from people who now type independently. Assisted methods to teach typing vary widely, were developed and refined in practice rather than research, and are not standardized in ways that would ensure the fidelity required for an RCT. An important outcome of our approach would be a manualized method—one that draws on both lived experience and scientific advancements—that should then be tested in an RCT.

Several letter writers objected to our decision not to prioritize message passing studies. But if someone does not find the existence of independent typers a compelling reason to study the methods by which they learned, it is unlikely that results from a message passing study would change their mind. Indeed, Lutz et al. suggest that even independent typers could somehow be

influenced by “extraordinarily subtle” but unspecified “ideomotor effects, cues, and psychological biases.” On their view, an individual’s testimony cannot be trusted unless they first show that they can communicate “across all environments, no matter who is or is not in the room.” This proposed requirement strikes us as both unserious and dehumanizing. It is unserious because it imposes a standard that could never be met in practice, and it is dehumanizing because no one else has to pass such a test to prove themselves worthy of being heard.

Lutz et al. and Tager-Flusberg write that assisted methods to teach typing pose “significant” risks, pointing to documented cases where a student learning to type with assistance made a false abuse accusation. We do not wish to minimize the harm such false accusations cause. But opposing assisted teaching methods because a false accusation could be made is a red herring.

First, false accusations of abuse are unfortunately also made by people who can speak (Lisak et al. 2010); no one would recommend preventing people from learning to speak because of the risk of a false accusation. Second, some accusations of abuse made by nonspeaking autistic people learning to type with assistance have been corroborated (Botash et al. 1994). Finally, disabled people are at least twice as likely to suffer abuse compared to non-disabled people (Amborski et al. 2022), a rate that is likely to be even higher among nonspeaking people who have no way to report abuse (Sobsey 1994).

Thus, while false accusations of abuse are concerning, the risk that they may occur should not outweigh the potential benefits of having access to assisted teaching methods that may allow someone to learn to express themselves independently. As Williams (2020) wrote, “we should all ask ourselves why a false accusation is more harmful than the inability to accuse” (p. 236). If an accusation of abuse is made by anyone—speaking or nonspeaking—the same procedures and the same care should be taken, including supporting the accuser, thoroughly investigating the allegation, and bringing charges if warranted.

We will close with three observations. First, nonspeaking autistic people are the experts about what it is like to be a nonspeaking autistic person. This is why collaborating with the community is essential. The letter writers do not seem to agree. For example, Lutz et al. assert that “spelling proponents refuse controlled testing,” and Tager-Flusberg writes that practitioners of assisted teaching methods “are not willing to participate in research to evaluate their methods.” The language in these quotes positions researchers as authorities whose judgment about which questions to ask and which methods to use should not be questioned by the people being studied. Moreover, criticizing individuals for being unwilling to participate in particular kinds of research undermines a core principle of research ethics: that individuals have the right to decline participation and choose the research in which they engage.

Second, blocking clinicians from trying new approaches and researchers from studying and developing ways to improve them prevents the progress everyone agrees is desperately needed. Thus, Lutz et al.’s admonition that, until message passing studies are conducted, assisted methods to teach typing “should not be funded by taxpayers or platformed [sic] in scientific journals” is indefensible. It is inconsistent with scientific norms, which involve studying

phenomena using multiple methods. And it is inconsistent with standard scientific practice, where decisions about funding and publication are made through peer review that evaluates the merits of the science, not by individuals declaring which methods or questions are acceptable.

Finally, nonspeaking autistic people should be provided with as many effective avenues to communication as possible. Assisted methods to teach typing have been effective for some now-independent typers. Not everyone will benefit equally. Understanding why, how, and for whom these methods would be a good match is therefore an important research priority, with the potential to meaningfully expand communication access and improve quality of life in this underserved population.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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