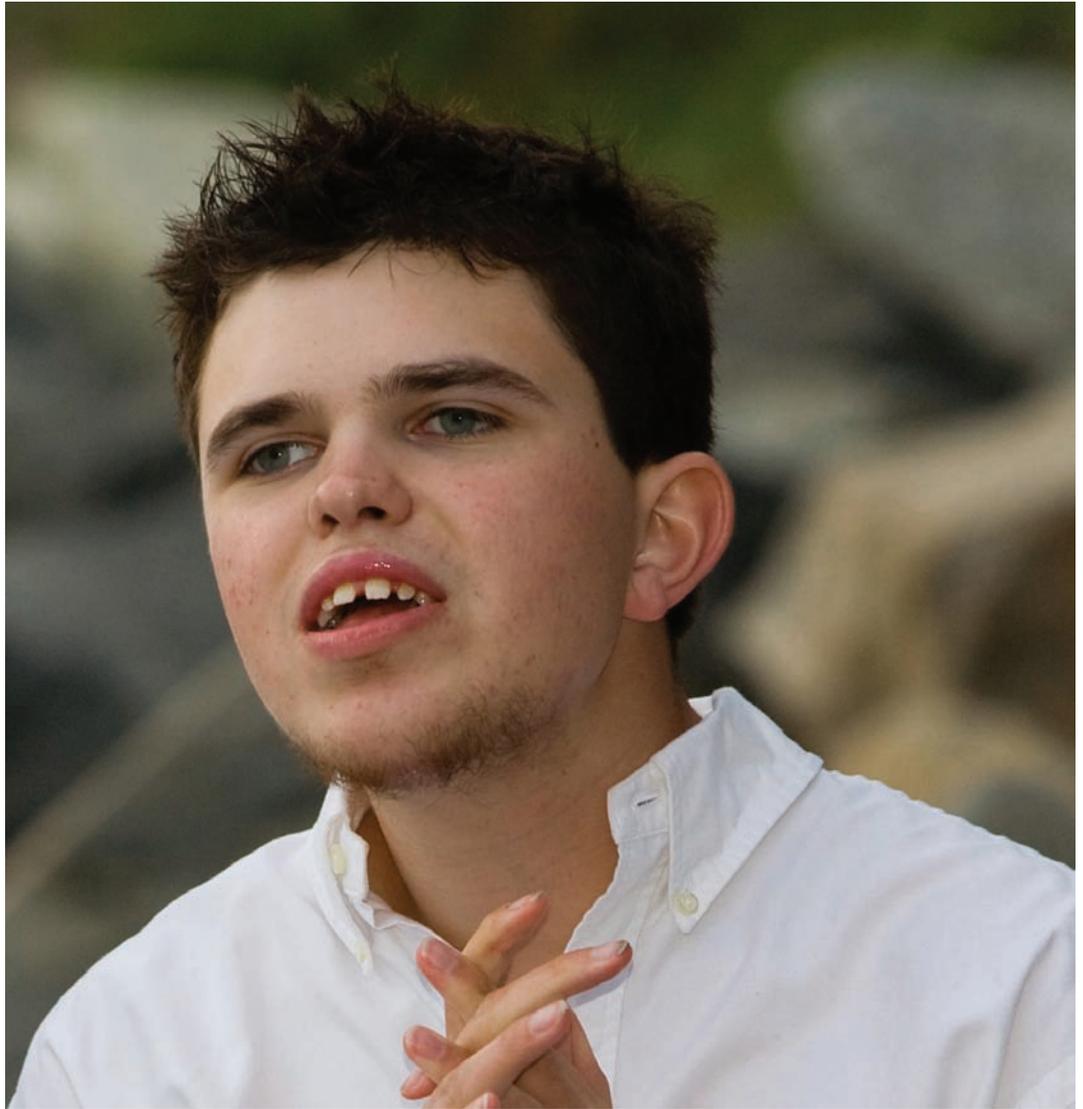


Jeremy Sicile-Kira was highlighted in the award-winning MTV *True Life* episode "I Have Autism" as well as in *Autism Life Skills* (Penguin), which was written by his mother, Chantal Sicile-Kira. Jeremy is graduating from high school with a full academic diploma in June 2010. He plans to attend college and to continue writing. Visit www.chantalsicile-kira.com.



How the Rapid Prompting Method Gave Me a Voice

By Jeremy Sicile-Kira

“RPM starts with the idea that all students are capable of learning.”

I am writing this on October 26, 2009. Having autism is hard enough, especially when it comes to communication for people who are nonverbal like I am. The Rapid Prompting Method (RPM) is not only a learning method but a door to open-ended communication for different people with autism. It is my good fortune to have been taught by Soma Mukhopadhyay, who pioneered RPM.

Soma, originally from India, has a son with autism named Tito, who is the mighty inspiration behind RPM. Soma needed to create a method that would help him not only to learn, but to communicate, as well. Soma was frustrated with the schools in India, where they lived, because they wouldn't accept Tito as a student. Just like they told my parents in France, where I was born, they told Soma that Tito was mentally retarded. I



was “diagnosed” with mental retardation, too, yet here we are both using RPM to discuss our similar past experience.

RPM is a method that can be used with different people as it is adapted to the needs of each individual. Some are auditory learners, and some are visual learners; the RPM teacher uses the learning channel that is best for that person. RPM uses a “teach and ask” paradigm for eliciting responses through intensive verbal, visual, and/or tactile prompts. RPM starts with the idea that all students are capable of learning. Despite behaviors, the academic focus of every RPM lesson is designed to activate the reasoning part of the brain so the students becomes distracted and engaged in the learning. The prompting competes with students’ self-stimulatory behavior.

At the beginning, RPM consists of teaching the student how to make a choice. The teacher begins by reading a few sentences to the student out loud, then asking the student a question and giving two or three possible answers on paper, pointing to the choices as they are read. Then the student points to the answer. This method can be used with different people who have autism. It helps autistic people to learn and eventually communicate so many things, such as about feelings or needs.

As you continue to learn, this evolves into not only pointing to words and phrases, but to letters on a paper letterboard that looks like a keyboard and spelling out whatever is on your mind. This gives teachers, friends, and family a look inside your thoughts. Pointing is a critical skill that is not easy for people like me because it involves motor planning and movement that is difficult for us. As a student using RPM, you develop better pointing skills. Once you have practiced for a long time, you can feel pretty confident and cool because you can express anything you feel.

While researching this article, I was curious as to how exactly Soma came up with a method that would be so helpful to others, so I sent her an e-mail. She told me, “I had no idea what I was doing with Tito then would later be called RPM. I was one desperate person who did not believe that Tito had mental retardation. I was

determined to prove the doctors wrong.” And how did it all start? “Tito was very selectively visual with numbers. One day while I watched him staring up at the date calendar, I brought it down. Since his visual attention was good with it, I pointed at number 1 and told him ‘This is one.’ Next I pointed at 2 and told him ‘This is 2.’ Next I had to check how well he remembered. So I asked him ‘Show me one.’ Tito pointed at number 1 on the calendar. That was the beginning.” How did she realize the great effect of the method, and what made Soma believe it would work for others? “When Portia Iversen from CAN [Cure Autism Now] invited me in 2000, I never imagined that I would make America my home, HALO [Helping Autism through Learning and Outreach] my workplace, and RPM my work ... I never realized the potential this method could have 9 years later. I see it and thank the circumstances that I faced ... My special thanks goes to Linda Lange who dedicated her organization HALO where I serve.” Visit www.halo-soma.org for more information on Soma, Tito, and RPM.

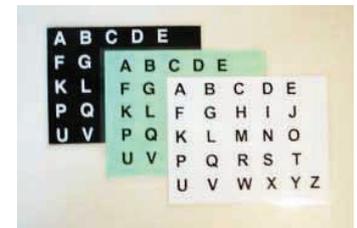
I have my mom and Portia Iversen to thank for finding Soma. My mom heard about Soma from Portia when Mom was doing research for her first book, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*. My mom thought RPM might help me, so she asked Soma to teach me. Soma taught me for about two years, and then my mom continued. My teachers at school had mightily tried to teach me but had no success before using RPM. They taught me to sit and listen. RPM taught me to learn.

Two years ago I started to use a LightWRITER™, but it is still difficult for me because it is really hard for me to push on the letter keys. I like the feel of the iPhone keyboard, but the keys are too small. It would be nice to have an iPhone the size of a LightWRITER™.

RPM has contributed greatly to making my life brighter and happier because it allows me to communicate my deepest feelings as well as my basic needs. It was very frustrating to have limited communication. Only a few years ago, I couldn’t even communicate that I had to use the restroom. Now I’m writing articles and have a book in progress. I can take classes and get good grades. At school, I hear and see the class, but if I have a question I can communicate with my support person and let her know. I can learn about topics that interest me. I can share my thoughts with friends and family. I would encourage parents and teachers to try RPM if your student has difficulties in communication like mine.

I would like to thank Soma, the school district administrators, the school staff, the educators, and the support persons for allowing my voice to be heard. Without you, my life would still be imprisoned in darkness.

“ My teachers at school had mightily tried to teach me but had no success before using RPM. They taught me to sit and listen. RPM taught me to learn. ”



Above top: Letterboards and LiteWRITER™ (above) for RPM

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