

Navigating Communication Difficulties

to Reach College Dreams: Akhil, Our Misunderstood Hero

By **Manisha Lad**

Imagine waking up one day and realizing you are not yourself, unable to control your mind or body. You want coffee, but the word “tea” comes out of your mouth. You start clapping automatically and can’t control it. I want to welcome you into the world of our only son Akhil, who exhibited such behaviors due to autism spectrum disorder.

The things we all take for granted in moving our bodies and communicating with each other were monumental tasks for Akhil. From a young age, he struggled with things the rest of us practiced naturally.

Akhil didn’t have any physical disabilities or gross motor delays, but he was stuck in his own world. Minimally verbal, he had no reliable mode of communication. He couldn’t express himself with words or use gestures. His future looked bleak, but with self-determination and the support of a loving family, Akhil became a story that inspires us. Akhil teaches us to never give up on our dreams because if you work hard and face your challenges, you can make them a reality.

The early years

As a young boy of 10, Akhil was greatly misunderstood. He was extremely hyper and found it impossible to sit still. He behaved this way at home and school. His most important problem, however, was a lack of communication. As his mom, I tried to encourage him with the help of picture exchange communication methods, but we had no success. We sent him to the best behavior therapy school with high hopes but were disappointed in the school’s negative feedback, which simply stated he didn’t know his numbers, colors, or shapes.

Everything changed the moment Akhil was exposed to an iPad at the age of 11. His silence finally ended.

Broken silence

At this age, Akhil had extremely limited language and only verbal imitation; he was not able to express his daily needs, and



his vocabulary was inconsistent. One day Akhil had a meltdown and started hitting me. I then used the iPad and asked him what was wrong. With supported typing he explained, “I am telling you in mind, and you are not listening.” Continuing my curiosity, I learned from him that he thinks “in pictures,” as if he was talking, but I could not hear it. I gratefully accept-

ed his mode of communication and presumed competence. However, I realized his inner world was not at all like ours. I needed two things to understand our son's mind: a solid relationship with him and his complete trust.

Akhil had struggles we couldn't always understand, but he had great aspirations to research medicine. We wanted to make it a reality for him. However, once his academic journey started, we learned it was hard for him to follow steps in his mind. Easy exercises we took for granted, like jumping jacks or yoga stretches, were nearly impossible for Akhil.

We'd gotten our son back from the silence he dwelled in, but now we feared we would lose him because of the struggles within his mind.

Relationships were complicated for Akhil since he found it hard to communicate. He was a visual learner and thinker, and he would put even auditory stimulation into pictures. For Akhil to thrive, I had to understand him and change my thinking. If Akhil stood a chance to live the life we dreamed for him, we needed to stimulate both the left and right hemispheres of his brain.

The long journey to communication and education
At the age of 13, Akhil couldn't form relationships with others. Then, he started showing extreme anger: pulling hair, slapping others on their heads, and pinching them for up to 20 minutes. I felt like it was a complete out-of-body experience. How could this be my Akhil who was behaving this way?

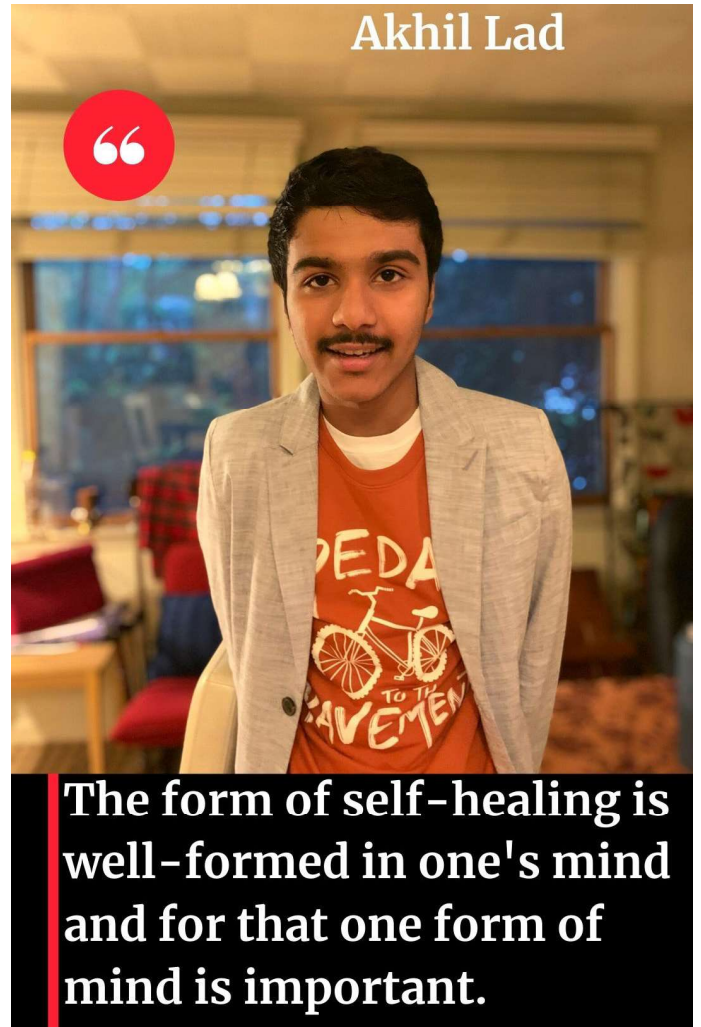
With the iPad facilitating our communication, I asked him why he would do these things. It had become overwhelming, and I wept as I typed. Finally, he looked into my eyes, recognizing my pain, and that was the moment our relationship changed. He typed, "I cannot see my body in the mind." We started using age-appropriate education methods, and soon, he was involved in our daily conversations.

The method of communication Akhil was using is called "supportive typing," and although it is unproven and controversial, it was a great hope to us. Mathematics was his strongest skill. We encouraged him to start with academic education, but it was challenging.

Our next goal was to focus on his reflex integration to get him functional and transition him to the Rapid Prompting Method (RPM).

Akhil was a visual-spatial thinker and needed a unique teaching style in pictures that offered him time for processing, as well as a significantly less restrictive environment. Unfortunately, the school was too overwhelming and caused a lot of sensory overloads; he had constant tantrums and aggressive episodes.

Akhil Lad



The form of self-healing is well-formed in one's mind and for that one form of mind is important.

We felt like we knew two versions of Akhil, the one at home and the one at school. Then we picked up a book that made it all clear. It was a book by Sally Goddard called *Reflexes, Learning, and Behavior: A Window into the Child's Mind*. The book taught us the brain's left hemisphere is responsible for language, speech, analytics, mathematics, and thinking in words, while the right hemisphere is visual, emotional, intuitive, and can think holistically.

We continued learning about the RPM method, an educational and communication method developed by Soma Mukhopadhyay. She taught her nonverbal son how to write and type and is the author of many books on the subject.

Growing to independence

With the help of RPM, I could get Akhil to use a letter board to communicate at the age of 15. It was an age-appropriate academic-based method where the teacher stated information, asked questions, and the student responded. As we started using RPM with Akhil, my relationship with him began to strengthen. I was able to learn about my son's understanding, reasoning, and inner world. Our sessions would include auditory, tactile, and visual prompts.

RPM allowed us to build on other skills, including cooking, daily living, arts, and motor skills. With the help of RPM and Neuro-sensorimotor reflex integration work, we were able to get Akhil to move from supported typing to independent pointing. Furthermore, he would verbalize letters as he pointed to them. Akhil was vocalizing more, allowing us to enroll him in online courses with credits.

Though his school was doing RPM, they still had no track for college education, and he couldn't form relationships due to anxiety and sensory overload. So, we had to hire tutors to teach him, with me being his communication partner.

To get such professionals is expensive, as it is backbreaking work that requires unbelievable dedication. Therefore, people would come and leave. Akhil had an interest in astrophysics and expressed he wanted to research medical science.

We had to make different types of keyboards for algebra, geometry, scientific symbols, and more. Digital transformation was needed as our next goal for Akhil was to get him more independent.

The exploration journey started now. Apart from his education and neurosensory motor work, we also had to find a college path. He was setting an example that being nonverbal doesn't mean one can't still perform at a higher level.

College days

Akhil became a college student undertaking an Associate Science Degree at the age of 19. He did this even though he was barely verbal. Luckily, minimally verbal or even nonverbal individuals can learn with the assistance of digital tools. As days passed, we were finishing online courses and collecting those transcripts needed for college education. But the other challenge was we needed a suitable college for Akhil. So we started visiting colleges willing to accept Akhil, understand his accommodations, and accept communication partners in his session.

The saying goes, "Where there is a will, there is a way," and it proved to be accurate, although it took us five years. Finally, we got our son into Rowan Community College in South Jersey. We were able to get three individuals with autism to get college admission and use RPM as a communication method. This was an incredible milestone. An admission letter came that stated Akhil was accepted as a freshman pursuing an Associate Science Degree.

We decided to try one subject: Survey of Mathematics. It was July 2020 when he got accepted, and college was starting in September 2020. It was a time controlled by COVID-19, and all education was online. So the only option was digital online education with in-person home tutors also only available on Zoom.

While his school was using Google Classroom, we tried Google Jamboard and Whiteboard with Akhil. With the help of Nearpod, we were able to digitize his lesson plans and combine other digital tools into one platform. Nearpod was the solution to our problem.

Akhil had to use the mouse and click on the answer. Then, his teacher would make the lesson active and present to him digitally as a communication partner. We had to create lesson plans and integrate other digital tools like Quizlet and YouTube. Auditory and visual channels were used automatically. Finally, the information was presented digitally.

When it came to tactile prompts, we used geometry models and other 2D models. We had a new challenge. How would we do algebra and geometry online? Could we integrate them with Nearpod? Yes, we found digital websites like Graspable Math and GeoGebra.

Instead of writing the entire expression as Akhil points or making an algebra board, we had to create an activity sheet in Graspable Math. This led to direct independent interaction with Akhil and his tutor, so we didn't need any algebraic symbols or number boards. While exposing him to chemistry, we often created activities, and Akhil would select the correct answers.

This is the incredible story of how our son, Akhil, completed many of his college courses with a GPA of 4.0 in math and algebra. We will always be thankful for digital transformation as it was the key to Akhil's success. Akhil is my hero and is also an inspiration behind the Akhil Autism Foundation, which can provide consultation for digital education for students.



Manisha Lad is an Autism Coach and Holistic Health Coach, as well as the Founder and Executive Director for the Akhil Autism Foundation. "Each day, make a difference in someone's life and transform yourself every moment" is the mantra of her life. She is an exceptionally dedicated professional with keen interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills. Despite a flourishing career in Information Technology, she decided to quit in 2001 when her only son Akhil was diagnosed with autism.

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