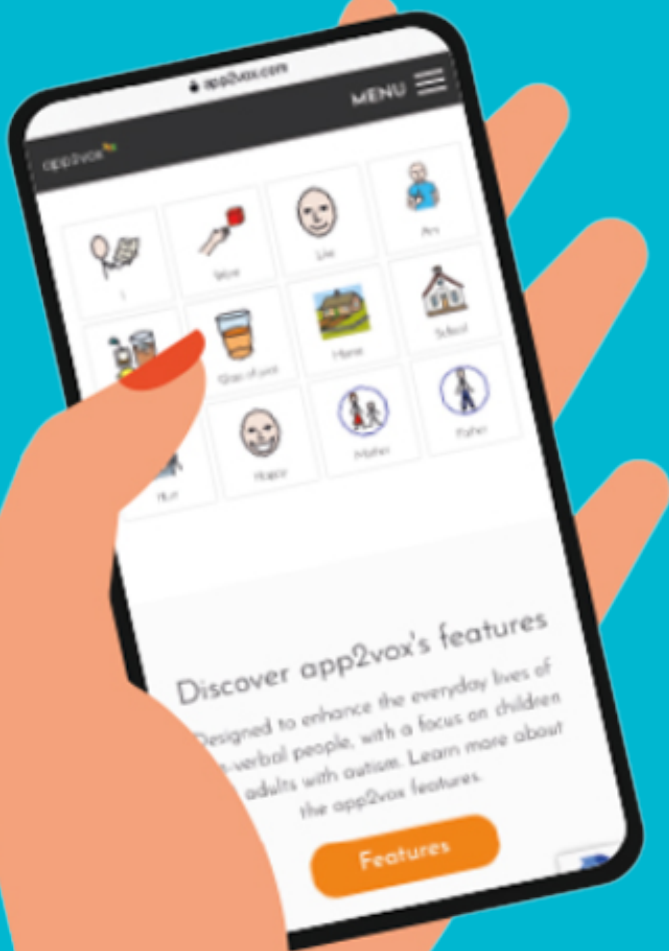


# Non-verbal autism apps should be free



app2vox 

The world is perhaps more accessible than ever. Think of the way that wheelchair ramps are now incorporated as standard into most public buildings and added to existing ones where possible. But imagine if you had to pay a charge every time you used the ramp instead of the stairs. It would be outrageous, because all the ramp does is ensure that someone in a wheelchair has as much access to the building as anyone who can walk.

Yet the same principle does not seem to apply to technology designed to give autistic people access to the world through helping them to communicate.

## **The Social Model**

The social model starts from the basis that we are all different and all have different needs. Disabilities arise when physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological variations are not properly accounted for and so some groups of people are excluded from certain places or activities. A building with access only by a flight of stairs is an example where someone in a wheelchair is left disabled not by anything about them but by the lack of facilities available to meet their needs.

The same model applies to autistic people. Autism is not a disease and there is nothing wrong with being autistic.

But autism can be disabling when society and facilities do not take proper account and make proper provision for the needs of autistic people, leading to discrimination and exclusion.

There is a responsibility on us all to do all we can to ensure that all aspects of society are as accessible as possible to everybody.

### **What Price Accessibility?**

The rapid advances in technology in recent years have brought huge benefits for many autistic people. In particular, the new options for alternative ways of communicating for autistic people who struggle with speech are a huge step forward. Instead of carrying round a pack of boards of pictures for a speechless autistic child to point at to communicate, an app on a smartphone or tablet can perform the same function - and provide many more pictures and a personalised approach. Other apps may help with frequently occurring needs of autistic people such as planning routines.

In some ways, these apps are the wheelchair ramps for autistic people who have little or no speech. They open up the world and possibilities that would otherwise be closed off to them.

But unlike wheelchair ramps, these solutions often come at a high financial price. Apps can either be expensive to buy in the first place or come free but then need expensive in-app purchases to make the most of them. Either way, a significant outlay can be required to access a basic human right - a way to express one's thoughts and feelings. This cannot be right.



## **Making Accessibility Free**

Everything has a cost, and everyone has to make a living. But is it right to charge premium prices for products that are not luxuries but vital tools to access what many of us take for granted?

There must be another way to provide this access without profit becoming part of the equation.

In the UK, the Equality Act says that nobody should have to pay for reasonable adjustments to ensure access to basic services. How do charges for apps providing basic communication tools for some groups fit into this?



Of course app developers and publishers have costs to cover, yet in other areas of accessibility the costs of providers seem to have been overcome. Is sponsorship or subsidy the answer for this basic need? At least one communications app for autistic people, app2vox, recognises this and is completely free to download and use.

## **Conclusion**

Communication is a basic human right, like being able to get into a school building or onto a bus. Isn't it time that the technology needed to give autistic people access to the world was free or at least priced fairly?

