

What's Wrong with ABC 20/20's Picture?

On January 6, ABC's 20/20 aired a story about a family in Michigan that had been torn apart by allegations that the father had sexually abused his daughter who has autism. The allegations purportedly came from the daughter herself while typing with the support of a facilitator, using facilitated communication.

The show concluded that the police and district attorney in the case grossly violated accepted practices of investigation and victimized the father, the father's son, and the family. The show also implied that facilitated communication is an invalid method for supporting communication and that the daughter in this family is certainly illiterate.

Unfortunately, ABC's 20/20 failed the most basic principles of fairness in its own reporting:

- It provided no full explanation of facilitated communication from researchers or practitioners who have championed the method.
- It failed to explain that there have been articles, books and standards for the practice of facilitation, including ones that specifically address how to respond to sensitive allegations.
- It failed to explain the goal of facilitation, namely independent typing and/or a combination of speaking and typing, and that a number of individuals have achieved this level of communication competence.
- It provided a description of the method that is directly contradictory to definitions of the method in the standards. For example, the reporter states that a facilitator "helps [the user] move her hand to the letters so she can type out her thoughts." In fact, the facilitator provides backward resistance, never guiding the hand toward the letters.
- It failed to explain that individuals who have achieved independent typing or who have passed assessments of their typing competence have trained with multiple facilitators, including their own parents and family members, but also teachers, speech/language pathologists, and others.
- Perhaps most importantly, it failed to alert viewers to the fact that there is an extensive body of research literature in which the method has been validated, including research that involves video eye-tracking showing that the subjects gazed at letters sequentially before ever moving the hand to type them (Grayson, Emerson, Howard-Hones & O'Neil, 2011), linguistic analysis demonstrating that the individuals with disabilities employ significantly different patterns of word use than their facilitators and that they were different from each other even when sharing the same facilitator (Zanobini & Scopese, 2001; Tuzzi, 2009), evidence of speech before and during typing (Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001; Kasa-Hendrickson & Broderick, 2009), and message passing, where

individuals demonstrated authorship by conveying information that was masked from the facilitators (Cardinal, Hanson, & Wakeham, 1996; Sheehan & Matuozzi, 1996; and Weiss, Wagner & Bauman, 1996). In contrast to the message passing test shown on the ABC story, in each of the research studies noted here, individuals with disabilities demonstrated the message passing ability only after multiple practice sessions; it is possible that with familiarity with the process of this assessment, the individuals became desensitized to anxiety associated with being so assessed.

- And it neglected to mention that the one scientific study that has been conducted on the facilitated communication and allegations of abuse found that the patterns of disclosure of abuse via facilitation follow precisely the pattern seen with children who speak, showing that in approximately 1/3 of the allegations there is corroborating evidence including physical evidence, in 1/3 of the allegations it is unclear whether there is sufficient evidence to proceed with legal action, and in 1/3 of the cases the allegation proves unfounded (see Botash, Babuts, Mitchell, O'Hara, Lynch, & Manuel, 1994).
- In its report, ABC properly notes that the police did not bring in a "naïve" facilitator (i.e., someone who was not privy to what the person with autism had purportedly communicated regarding abuse.) The purpose of this approach is to see if the person repeats the content while typing with the support of the second facilitator. If the person fails to produce the content, one does not know if the original content came from the person or not. If the person reproduces similar content and language, then it rests with the courts to decide on the veracity of the content. However, ABC failed to mention that the Facilitated Communication trainer who had first introduced the method to the family insisted, to no avail, that the prosecution team bring in a naïve facilitator and would not accept the allegations as best practices were not followed.

It is disappointing that ABC presented such a one sided view that does not accurately reflect the method, the research or the standards of best practice. A statement summarizing the research and references to the studies cited above can be found at:

http://soe.syr.edu/centers_institutes/institute_communication_inclusion/Research/authorship_and_controversy.aspx

http://soe.syr.edu/media/documents/2011/6/Research_Supporting_Authorship_version_22.pdf

The reference for the research on reporting of sexual abuse allegations is:

Botash A.S., Babuts D., Mitchell N., O'Hara M, Lynch L., Manuel J. (1994). Evaluations of children who have disclosed sexual abuse via facilitated communication. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 148(12):1282-7.