

Facilitation Communication Training Statement

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The New York Times magazine recently published a story that involved facilitated communication.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/25/magazine/the-strange-case-of-anna-stubblefield.html?_r=0

It is a disturbing case. While we understand that there will be an appeal, and do not at this stage wish to comment on the particular facts, this case provides a stark reminder about the critical nature of best practice as it relates to this method of communication and those individuals for whom it is most appropriate. Specifically, facilitated communication training must always include teaching individuals how to confirm that they are authors of the words typed. In fact, any form of supported communication that does not adhere to the principles and standards outlined in this document and in the training and documentation standards put forth by the Institute on Communication and Inclusion, should not be considered facilitated communication.

Facilitated Communication training (FCT) is a form of Augmentative and Alternative Communication that (at least in its early stages) involves physical and emotional support to aid the communication user in learning how to point effectively to select pictures, words or letters to convey his or her thoughts (Crossley, 1994). FCT is a communication training approach that can be used alongside other methods. It is often used with individuals for whom verbal speech is limited and/or not reliable and who may have difficulties with motor planning that impact their communication and ability to independently initiate or execute intentional movement. While the physical component of support is typically the most visible and varied across individuals, we must not forget that this physical support is always provided as a training mechanism to help the individual to learn to use his or her body differently. The goal is always a fading of that support toward independent access of a device.

As explained in the workshops of the Institute on Communication and Inclusion, individuals may require physical support at the hand, arm, or elbow during the training phase, making it possible for them to be influenced in their pointing and drawing into question whether they are in fact the author of the words typed. Observers of the communication (and, indeed, facilitators) may wonder if the communication is entirely genuine (i.e. what the person with the communication impairment intended to say). Training in facilitation should thus include focus on these elements:

- Making sure the communicator scans the board or keyboard before making any selection. Do not accept selections unless the communicator has looked first.
- Providing the least support necessary for communication to be successful (which may vary with different tasks – e.g. a person may be able to select from Yes/No and multiple-choice options independently but still need support to type).

- Working on improving the communicator's pointing skills so facilitators can reduce support for all activities (carefully chosen iPad apps can help with this).

As the facilitated communication training proceeds, however, facilitators and other observers should begin to see compelling evidence of the FCT user's authorship. For example, some or all of the following may be apparent:

- Independent, reliable use of yes/no either by speaking, nodding or pointing to words
- Ability to convey information not known to the facilitator (i.e., message passing)
- Physical independence in some aspects of the communication, for example in typing familiar words such as modifiers, selecting the space bar between words, use of punctuation
- Independent pointing to multiple choice answers
- Speaking the words as they are typing, or before they are typed
- Progressively greater physical independence in sentence level communication (moving support from the hand or wrist to the elbow, for example, and then from elbow to shoulder, and then with the facilitator's hand lifting off the shoulder)
- Distinctive use of particular words that seem to characterize the individual's typing, and seeing similar usage across multiple facilitators (beginning sentences with a particular word or phrase, for example, or stringing together multiple words to form an adjectival phrase), consistent length of utterances, common sentence constructions, etc.

Failure to see any of these markers of authorship raises doubts about the process and should lead to a review of training practices and additional intervention on the part of a skilled trainer.

Further, whenever communication is especially critical and could address safety or other life decisions, it is vital to take special measures to confirm authorship – by, for example,

- Seeing if the person conveys similar content with multiple facilitators, including a facilitator who is unaware of the prior communication about the critical topic
- Use of independently accessed yes/no and/or multiple choice answers to questions

Without such verification, the facilitator or other observers will be unable to be confident about authorship of the communication. Research on facilitated communication has produced equivocal results, with some studies not showing authorship through this method and others confirming authorship. However, no amount of research studies can confirm or deny any particular individual's communication. This must be examined individually, person by person, context by context. The facilitator and observers should be able to see progress during the training process.

Over time, the evidence of authorship should be extensive. For example, we have observed and worked with individuals who have progressed through facilitated communication training and have achieved the ability to type without physical support or with minimal support. Some people have developed speech so that they can say words before and as they type them. Some individuals, too, have become effective in sharing information across settings, where the facilitator is not aware of the information until typed by the person involved in facilitated communication training. While it would have been impossible to be certain in the early stages that the communication produced by these individuals was theirs alone, uninfluenced by facilitators, over time they have proved their authenticity. All of these competencies (independent typing, speech, and/or message passing) have been attained and demonstrated by individuals (and facilitators) who have had sustained support and access to facilitated communication training over a period of time; have consistently implemented best practices; and evidenced some or all of the indicators of authorship outlined above.

Presuming the individual to be competent (i.e., interested in and capable of developing literacy and communication skills) is a cornerstone concept in FCT. This stance avoids the danger of cutting off possibility before it has been exhaustively sought, but it is not a license to ignore the importance of teaching independent communication. Further, presuming competence does not mean assuming that the individual does not need opportunities to develop the skills of effective typed communication – i.e. literacy, reliable pointing, self-correction strategies. Naturally, a key aspect of the teaching/training situation is encouraging the student. At the same time, facilitators are obliged to make sure that they help the person develop ways of confirming or proving her or his authorship. This can take weeks, months, and even years, but it must be integral to FCT. The goal is always to enable individuals to develop to the point where communication will be transparently theirs alone, without the possibility of influence –beyond, that is, the typical kind of influence that occurs between any two persons conversing with each other through speech. Failure to invoke these standards will inevitably lead to questions about whether a person relying on facilitation is communicating or not.