



Wyomissing Behavior Analysts, Ltd.

2032 Lincoln Court • Wyomissing, PA 19610 • 610-777-5459

FACILITATED COMMUNICATION

Gary Champlin, Ph.D.

Facilitated Communication is a method for assisting people to communicate by pointing to letters in order to spell words and to make sentences (e.g., typing on a keyboard). The assistance has involved physical support (i.e., backward pressure, not guidance) as well as verbal and emotional support (e.g., “I believe in you and know you can do it”).

The ‘backward pressure’ means that the person’s hand is held up (as opposed to being guided down) to the key or letter board. In order to point at or select a particular letter, the person must apply pressure against the support (not just give in to it). Now that sounds interesting! In helping people to do things, we have usually been more oriented to guiding people by applying pressure in the same direction we want them to go and then fading the guidance as they seem to catch on. How could it be that someone is now saying that pressure in the opposite direction works better?

Well, there are some even more astounding things about this Facilitated Communication. It has even been featured on the television shows “Prime Time” and “Larry King Live”. It seems that this method has allowed some people with Cerebral Palsy and Autism (who previously seemed to be capable of very little and to have extremely low IQ’s) to communicate some rather profound thoughts. People with autism have typed out sentences like “I do not like being autistic”, “My body does not always do what I tell it to do”. As titled in one article, the method has allowed us to truly discover “The Lost Person Within”.

Imagine the shocked and skeptical reaction of others to hear of all this, especially if we were the ones to have given the IQ Tests, worked with these people for years, and prided ourselves for the great job we felt we were doing with the only technology we had.

I must admit to being one of the skeptics. I’d argue that its good to be a skeptic, or should I say, “one who critically evaluates”. The method has been criticized as being a hoax and that it is really the people giving the support (the Facilitators) who are doing the typing. That could be in some cases. If it is done correctly, however, the idea of backward pressure would seem to suggest against it. There are now an overwhelming and ever growing number of examples in which people have typed things their Facilitator never knew. People are noted to use a style unique to themselves and regardless of who happened to be doing the facilitating.

Give someone a new voice and you are liable to hear some things you don't like. Some controversy has been aroused by people typing out statements about things that happened to them in the past (e.g., someone hit them, someone sexually abused them, etc.). Oh boy! Now what do we do with that?

Thus far, the Courts have not been inclined to accept testimony provided through Facilitated Communication - after all, that other person is supporting their hand or arm. The person is not saying it totally independently. I suspect the Court Rulings will start to sway in the other direction (as has my own skepticism) with the avalanche of reports of successful use of this Facilitated Communication. Part of the method is also to fade the support - from the hand to the arm to the shoulder to maybe no physical support at all. This is not likely to be possible with everyone. For those that do, it will be difficult to deny they are not typing their own thoughts. But which is not to say that there might not be cases in which the Facilitator is the one directing the pointing or that people cannot lie using a typewriter just as they might with their voice!

Why does this Facilitated Communication seem to work? The theory seems to be that the problem for some people is not that they are not intelligent, but rather that there is a problem with the brain's ability to control muscle responses → there is a neuro-motor disability. It is more obvious in people with cerebral palsy who engage in a lot of involuntary movement and seem not to be able to control their limbs and/or mouth movements. In a similar (but different) way, people with autism may also be unable to control their behaviors and movements (e.g., the repetitive and seemingly illogical abusive behaviors).

Speech is complicated and requires a great deal of motor control (which most of us take for granted). With Facilitated Communication, the requested motor response is pointing or pecking at a key. It is about as simple a motor response as you can get. The physical support appears to be important for getting the person to focus and/or connect → it helps to overcome that neuro-motor disability.

Facilitated Communication is a method not a goal. It is a method for helping people to access information they have already learned. It is not teaching people how to read or write. Have you ever noticed or heard of a person with autism who was always looking at books, memorizing phone books, watching Jeopardy? Did you see the movie "Rain Man"? Maybe some people really are smarter than they act!!! All we have to do is help them to find a better way to let us know. Facilitated Communication appears to be one answer for some people.

Reprinted from The Arc of Berks County Newsletter (March 1993). For subscription information call 610-603-0227 or e-mail berksarc@ptd.net.