

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Facilitated communication: now the bad news

by Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

ARRI has carried several full-length feature stories about facilitated communication (F/C), as well as a number of favorable letters from parents and teachers. In fact, ARRI has published several editorials on what is now called facilitated communication long before the term F/C was used.

Having a somewhat paternal interest in F/C, I am delighted at the way F/C has captured the attention of the autism world. I feel that F/C should be given a good solid try with every autistic person who has difficulty in communicating. Thanks to the Adriana Foundation (phone 617-232-8550) for taking the lead in spreading the word about F/C. So far, so good.

Now the bad news: while F/C has provided a thrilling breakthrough for some families, it has led to disaster for others:

Mrs. G., a New York mother of an 12 year old autistic boy, says that "it was the most horrible experience I have ever had."

Mr. M, a New York state father, told me that "our lives have been a daily nightmare since this thing started months ago."

Mr. and Mrs. N, an Illinois family, write, "This has been an utterly horrible, devastating experience."

Tony, an Australian group home worker stated, on Australian television, that "my life has been ruined."

The cause of this misery? Misuse of facilitated communication. In case after case, poorly trained, over-zealous facilitators have uncovered, they believe, evidence of child molestation by family members. They report the parents to the authorities and the nightmare begins:

Mrs. N, the Illinois mother, and her husband picked up their non-speaking autistic daughter at her school on a recent Friday afternoon and drove home. A sheriff's car followed them into their driveway—for the purpose of taking Mr. N to jail. No hearings, no trial, to jail. The N's had been enthusiastic about F/C and had recently attended a two-day workshop. They had been puzzled, but still enthusiastic, when the notebooks their daughter brought home from school showed that she had (supposedly) answered via F/C that she had spent a weekend at "Gram's house going down monstrous hills on a sled." Her grandmother had been dead for years, had been called "Bubba," rather than "Gram," had lived in a third-floor apartment near no hills, and there never had been a sled. There were many others instances of very faulty F/C, but the family was still enthusiastic. Once the charges against the family were levelled, they underwent two weeks of grilling and horror. Mr. N slept with his clothes on in case the police came during the night to take him to jail. After investigating the charges, including a number of medical examinations of the girl, the charges were dropped as groundless. There was no evidence that the daughter could actually communicate.

Mrs. G, the New York mother who was (and still is) enthusiastic about F/C, underwent five hours of police grilling when her son reportedly accused her of molesting him. The boy was taken out of the home and questioned repeatedly by the police. Since it was difficult for her to prove her innocence, Mrs. G was terrified that she would lose her son permanently. "The worst time of my life," Mrs. G told me.

It turned out that the boy was describing a sex education video that he had seen. After a week of investigation, the charges were dismissed.

In another New York case, a mute autistic girl was said to have reported frequent sexual abuse (200 times!) by both her father and grandfather. The father is charged with abuse and the mother is charged with failing to report the abuse. The authorities, depending entirely upon F/C, had not investigated to learn that both grandfathers had been dead for many years, and that, although the girl reported that "during my period I bled all over the place," she has not begun menstruating. As in the earlier case, medical exams showed no evidence whatever of sexual abuse or sexual experience. Nevertheless, this case has been in court for many weeks. (The mother is a teacher of autistic children, trained in F/C.)

The foregoing cases (like the case of Carla, on page 1) represent over-facilitated miscommunication: probable inadvertent fabrication by a "facilitator" whose zeal and imagination have outrun his or her competence and good judgment.

In contrast to these cases of non-communicating autistic persons is the experience of a well-known East Coast school for autistic children. A student used F/C to report frequent sexual abuse of other students by a certain staff member. An investigation showed that the accused staff member could not possibly have been present during many of the alleged incidents. Confronted, the autistic student admitted, again through F/C, that he had made the charges up because he was jealous of the relationship between the facilitator and the staff member.

In other cases we don't know if false charges are the result of miscommunication or deliberate falsification. In June, 1991, the Australian version of *60 Minutes* presented a case in which each of three handicapped women reportedly accused a man of rape. Their charges were strikingly similar and thus appeared corroborative. All three identified the rapist as the caretaker at their group home and told of a tattoo on his abdomen of a naked woman. On *60 Minutes*, the caretaker said that although the court had exonerated him, his life was ruined. He was unemployed and no one would hire him. "Please raise your jumper," said the interviewer. There was no naked lady on his abdomen. For this and other reasons, the case had been dismissed.

I am aware of seven cases in which F/C has been used to accuse people of sexual

abuse. Three were dropped in the pre-trial stage; two were dismissed after lengthy legal trials, and two are still in court.

Everyone loses as the result of ill-advised use of F/C. The accused families suffer the most. But there are other losers. Non-speaking autistic children or adults who might have benefitted from F/C may never get that chance if F/C is discredited, as it surely will be, by repeated charges that it is a hoax. Millions of viewers in Australia watched the *60 Minutes* segment in which F/C was discredited. Millions of Canadian TV watchers (and some in the U.S.), saw the segment on the Canadian *60 Minutes* show in which teachers praised F/C to the skies, while demonstrating how well their autistic students could type pig, barn, cow, etc., in response to seeing flash cards. When the TV interviewer turned the cards 90 degrees, so they could be seen only by the student, and not the facilitator, the percentage correct dropped from 100 to 20.

Formerly an enthusiastic supporter of F/C, Australian psychologist Robert Cummins now calls it a "cult of deception."

If F/C continues to lose credibility because it has been oversold by its supporters, true cases of abuse will never come to light because overly zealous facilitators have cried "wolf!" too often.

What to do?

It is not too late to save F/C from the charges of "Ouija board!" "Hoax!" "Snake oil!" "Cultism!" which have literally, not hypothetically, been directed against it in recent months by well-known and respected professionals in the field of autism. To save F/C, its advocates must do several things:

First, stop saying it works 100% of the time. Nothing — no treatment — works 100% of the time. Saying 100% puts terrible pressure on the facilitators to come up with something.

Second: all facilitators in training should be clearly informed about the potential for abuse of F/C, including the negative court findings. This will not instill enthusiasm, but will help prevent further abuse. Students in firearms courses are first taught safety. So too with F/C. Videotapes of the Australian and Canadian *60 Minutes* programs would provide valuable and sobering input to these students.

Third: validation of F/C output should be stressed. A five-minute "experiment" such as the one on Canadian *60 Minutes* (described above) is easy to do. The Australians have devised some ingenious techniques in which the facilitator and student wear earphones. When the same questions are played to the student and facilitator, FC always works. When the facilitator hears different questions, or hears only music, the accuracy often drops precipitously.

F/C is a tool of great potential; misused, it can do great harm. The challenges to F/C set forth in our last ARRI editorial (5/4) still stand.

(See related story, page 1)