

## Let's teach the kids to read!

During the last two years facilitated communication has been welcomed with enormous enthusiasm in the U.S., where it had been virtually dormant, even though it was discovered and practiced here over 30 years ago.

Now that the initial burst of enthusiasm has subsided to some degree, difficult questions have begun to be asked. Why, in 11 successive court cases in Australia in which allegations of sexual or physical abuse have been made via F/C, have the courts decided that it was possibly the facilitator, and not the supposed victim, who was communicating? Why, in both of the two U.S. court cases which have been decided thus far, have the judges arrived at similar conclusions and rejected allegations made by F/C?

An obvious, albeit incorrect, answer is that F/C does not work. But F/C *does* work . . . in some cases. The problem is that F/C has clearly been oversold. For reasons known only to themselves, some advocates of F/C have claimed, and continue to claim, that it works on 100% of the cases of non-speaking autistic individuals. Yes, 100% is the claim, even though, on the face of it, 100% is absurd. There is scarcely a high school in the U.S. where anywhere near 100% of normal, non-autistic students are literate. Yet we are asked to believe that 100% of the mute autistic population can express themselves in writing—even though there is little evidence that the vast majority of these individuals can *read*.

As an early advocate of what is now called F/C, starting in the 1960s, I am very concerned that the publicity stemming from the court decisions may poison attitudes about F/C here in the U.S., just as similar court decisions have poisoned public opinion about F/C in Australia and Europe.

Many babies have been thrown out with the bath water. It is not too late to prevent that from happening to F/C. But it will take a modicum of intelligence. Let's start with the basics, with Step 1.

If you don't know how to read, you don't know how to write. That is quite obvious, but nevertheless, literacy has all too often been simply assumed, rather than taught or demonstrated. Yes, certainly some autistic individuals have learned to read on their own, just as have many non-autistic persons. But it is unwise in the extreme to simply assume that an autistic person—or anyone else—can read unless he or she has been explicitly taught to read and has demonstrated the ability to do so. To fail to teach them to read would be a major error, and that concerns me.

Almost 30 years ago, when I first began communicating with other parents of autistic children, a brief paper titled "Teaching Reading to a Mute Autistic Boy Through Operant Conditioning" caught my eye. It was written by Frank Hewitt, then principal of the Children's School at the Neuropsychiatric Institute at UCLA, and published in *The Reading Teacher* for May 9, 1964. I

thought it was an extremely valuable paper for parents of autistic children to have, and I requested permission to copy and distribute it. It is still on the publication list of the ARRI. (For a copy, send \$1 and an SASE.)

The paper describes Jimmy as a non-speaking, self-stimming, disruptive 13-year-old who knocked over chairs and ran wild when first entering the classroom.

Operant conditioning (now known as behavior modification) was very new then, so the article explained how Jimmy's attention was captured with gumdrop rewards. Jimmy was taught in very tiny steps—rewarded for giving a ball to the teacher when "ball" was requested; rewarded for drawing a red circle to depict a ball, and so forth. This was *before* teaching him to read was started. Literacy was not assumed.

Once the teacher was assured that Jimmy knew what a ball was, Jimmy was required to slide a word card saying "ball" under the picture of a ball. Once that skill was well learned, Jimmy was shown two pictures, a ball and a box, and required to slide the written word under the appropriate picture to receive a gumdrop. Through slow and painstaking steps, a 55-word reading vocabulary was taught, then word combinations ("ball in cup," "book on chair," etc.).

The effect of the reading instruction on Jimmy was profound. He became a more sociable, happy youngster, eager to learn and to try to communicate. He was taught to write, "I want candy" in order to receive a gumdrop. All this took 18 months.

"In Jimmy's case," Hewitt writes, "acquisition of rudimentary reading and writing skills seemed to heighten his interest in the environment and make him more accessible to social control. On the basis of such a 'breakthrough' experienced with Jimmy, teaching reading and writing may offer a most promising means of furthering socialization and treatment with heretofore isolated autistic children."

I agree with Hewitt's description of this case as a "breakthrough." In fact, the breakthrough described by Hewitt and attributed to operant conditioning, as well as several similar cases of extraordinary improvement in autistic children I had observed in Ivar Lovaas' clinic at UCLA, led me, a year later, to found the Autism Society of America. The talk I gave at the founding meeting in November, 1965, and at many later meetings, as I founded individual chapters of the ASA, was titled, "Operant conditioning: Breakthrough in the treatment of mentally ill children." (For a copy, send \$1 and SASE.) It was imperative for parents to know that their autistic children could be *taught*, using the new technique of operant conditioning. Until then psychotherapy and drugs were the only options.

Contrast the meticulous teaching which helped Jimmy to read with the oversimplified assumption of pre-existing literacy that is made all too often these days by practitioners of F/C. Of course there are

cases of pre-existing literacy, where autistic children and adults have learned to read on their own. It happens with autistic children as it does with some normal children. But it is dangerous to assume that teaching is unnecessary. A child who can't slide the "apple" card in front of the apple is not ready for F/C!

In the widely publicized case of Carla, the 28-year-old Australian girl who purportedly used F/C to accuse her father of rape, the court concluded, after a year-long investigation, that Carla did not even know the letters of the alphabet. "I wasn't aware of that!" her facilitator was heard to gasp in the courtroom. Carla and her family could have been spared a year's ordeal and a fortune in legal fees if the assumption of pre-existing literacy had not been made.

My own son Mark was taught to read at age 10, long before there was mandatory public education for autism. My wife and I hired a graduate student in education, who had taken several courses on teaching reading at the elementary level. She got absolutely nowhere. Lovaas then sent us a graduate student, David Ryback, who knew the rudiments of "operant conditioning." Within a few days Mark had learned the alphabet and a few simple words. David taught the teacher the techniques of reinforcement, prompting and fading. By the end of the year Mark was reading at the third grade level. Now he reads at the 8th grade level with a good grasp of factual, but not conceptual, material. (Later, when Mark was taught to sound out words by phonics, by Mary Moss, his wonderful 93-year-old teacher at a small private school, he made even more significant advances in reading. He had initially been taught to read whole words.) Mark's ability to read has truly been a blessing!

In her excellent new book *Silent Words*, Peggy Eastham provides a beautifully detailed account of how she taught her mute autistic son David to read during his teenage years. It was hard, time-consuming work. In 1982, at age 18, David began communicating on a Sharp Memo-Writer. Before long he was writing poetry of publishable quality.

Recently I had the pleasure of spending an afternoon with Peggy Eastham. She showed me dozens of hand-made word cards, workbook exercises and other remarkably ingenious techniques that she had devised in order to teach David to read. Some of these methods are presented as an appendix to *Silent Words*. She is considering having videotapes made in which she will demonstrate some of the other teaching techniques she had developed in the years-long process of teaching David to read. Although David gained recognition as a gifted poet before his untimely death, David's literacy did not come easily.

Facilitated communication has proven to be a wonderful boon for *some* autistic children. It may be for others as well—provided they are first taught to read.