

# Facilitated communication: does it really work?

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concluding that some participants were definitely communicating independently, while others were being influenced by facilitators. The panel, according to Biklen, "concluded that [their study] had produced support from those who claimed facilitated communication had validity *and* for those who doubted it." The panel noted that developmentally disabled individuals are "extremely susceptible to influence by people who may be unaware of the extent to which they may be influencing decisions."

Biklen counters that many of the individuals he communicated with typed their thoughts independently—with no touch from a facilitator—while in other cases "the nature of communication varied across individuals, despite the fact that a single facilitator might be facilitating; there were facial expressions, verbal noises, including laughter, or other signs of a person's understanding of communication; and/or in some instances, the content of the communication suggested that it *really* came from the person communicating, not from the facilitator."

*Biklen reports that Crossley's non-verbal, low-functioning autistic students were able to carry on high-level conversations, discuss abstract thoughts and feelings, and even tell jokes.*

The role of the facilitator, Biklen says, is not to cue the autistic individual, but rather to slow the student's hand down and pull it back after a letter is typed; otherwise, he says, the students may persevere, striking the same key over and over.

Crossley quotes an autistic student who worked with Rosalind Oppenheim, a pioneer in the area of facilitated communication for autistic individuals: "I can't remember how to write the letters without your finger touching my skin."

## A problem of expression, not understanding?

Biklen says that prevailing theories about the nature of autism cannot explain the remarkable non-verbal language abilities of Crossley's students. He concludes that "the obvious interpretation is that they have a neurologically based problem of expression"—but, perhaps, no problem in *understanding* language. "With facilitation," he speculates, "the person can bypass his or her problem of verbal expression and type natural language." He cites Temple Grandin, writing about her own experiences as an

autistic child: "... communication had been a one-way street for me. I could understand what was being said, but I was unable to respond. Screaming and flapping my hands was my only way to communicate."

Because of the range of individuals currently diagnosed as autistic, and the likelihood that they indeed do have a wide range of intellectual ability, Biklen says it is not possible to know how many autistic individuals can benefit from facilitated communication. "Nevertheless," he says, "it is especially noteworthy and encouraging that among those for whom facilitated communication has allowed high levels of literacy and numeracy are people who were previously presumed to be among the 'lowest' intellectually functioning persons labeled autistic."

In a letter to ARRI, Crossley says, "I think the issue we're coming to is whether in fact . . . *most* non-speaking autistic people can communicate through spelling or whether it's really only one sub-category. Work at DEAL certainly supports the view that it's *most*, if not almost all."

Biklen stresses, however, that facilitated communication is not a cure for autism, and that "the nature of the disability doesn't go away."

Some students learn communication skills amazingly quickly, Biklen says, while others progress much more slowly. Even those who communicate fluently with the Canon Communicators tend to have their idiosyncrasies, he notes: "They may refuse to communicate at particular moments, in particular situations, with certain people, or for specific time periods . . . some are independent in some situations, but dependent or noncommunicative in others, whether with the same or other people. Some . . . will produce obviously incorrect information."

Crossley feels that the attitude of the facilitator is important—for instance, that the facilitator must not be patronizing or dominant. While she outlines a number of "attitudinal dimensions" and techniques, reports from other researchers and parents indicate that simply introducing an autistic individual to a communication device may be just as effective. And while the Canon Communicator appears to be the most efficient communication device, standard typewriters also have been used successfully by others.

Crossley's technique includes:

- creating a comfortable environment
- initially, and only when necessary, providing physical support under the forearm, at the wrist, or at the index finger.
- pulling back the individual's hand or arm after each key is typed.
- progressing through pictures, words, sentences, letters, and name spelling. Crossley stresses helping the individual to avoid errors—for instance, repeating the question if a nonsensical answer is made.
- providing encouragement, and *not* correcting errors.

-being firm about continuing with the communication session, and redirecting the individual's attention back to the communication device when necessary, while ignoring "stims," shrieking, etc.

-encouraging practice.

-reverting to set, structured questions when the individual appears to be consistently producing nonsensical answers.

*It is encouraging, Biklen says, that among those using facilitated communication successfully are people "previously presumed to be among the lowest intellectually functioning persons labeled autistic."*

-offering choices of interesting activities (such as writing captions for cartoons), while avoiding "test" questions such as "is this a cup or a spoon?"

-using group sessions, and switching facilitators around so they work with more than one autistic individual.

"Don't start communication work by focusing on the expression of feelings," she says. "... Allow the person . . . to initiate feelings at his or her own choosing."

Biklen has organized a facilitated communication program in the Syracuse City School District in New York. More than 20 students have participated to date, and he hopes to expand the number to 40 this school year.

"Communication unbound: autism and praxis," Douglas Biklen; *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 60, No. 3, August 1990. Address: Douglas Biklen, Division of Special Education, Syracuse University, 805 South Crouse Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13244-2280.

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"After years of silence, a child communicates," Maureen Nolan, *The Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York, September 3, 1990.

Note: The Canon Communicator costs about \$400. Information about the device is available from Canon U.S.A., Inc., One Canon Plaza, Lake Success, New York, NY 11042-9979, tel. (516)483-8700.

**A** holiday idea:  
give gift subscriptions of the ARRI to parents and professionals interested in autism!