

Debate escalates over Facilitated Communication

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autistic children because they suffer from "apraxia"—as he explains it, "an inability...to make their bodies do what they want, when they want." He compares autistic children with people suffering from Parkinsonism, a neurological disorder, noting that some Parkinson's patients can walk perfectly when touched lightly by another person but are incapable of walking at all without such help. Biklen says that individuals using F/C "all require some form of facilitation to do nearly everything, including playing games, sitting in groups, or participating in other classroom activities." It should not be surprising, he says, that they need help to communicate as well.

Regarding the complexity of F/C communications by the DEAL students, Biklen says, "I am not convinced that my conversation with them was terribly unlike the kinds of conversations that we may observe in school or other organized teenage discussion groups." He says low-functioning autistic individuals' grasp of language, grammar and spelling is not surprising since "it is generally recognized that among the nondisabled population, a significant proportion of individuals learn to read on their own, often before ever entering school, simply by being exposed to written language on television, on signs and billboards, and through newspapers, magazines and books."

Cummins and Prior reiterate their skepticism about low-functioning, nonverbal autistic individuals communicating at a level not seen in high-functioning, fully verbal autistic persons. They suspect a "Clever Hans" effect (a phenomenon named after a "talking" horse, who could tap out letters and numbers; a lengthy investigation determined that the horse's owner, who sincerely believed that the horse was communicating, was actually cueing him with body language so subtle that observers could not detect it).

"A hand on the shoulder could provide differential pressure cues," Cummins and Prior note. "An assistant's hand that is visible to the client could provide additional visual cues Alternatively, if 'hand shadowing' is employed, where the assistant's hand is held above the client's hand, then direct visual cues for correct responding may be provided."

Cummins and Prior add that "on not one single occasion has a systematic investigation of assisted communication revealed consistent and valid evidence that such communications emanate from the client. Rather, all relevant investigations have revealed that in each instance studied the assistant has, wittingly or unwittingly, been responsible for the recorded response."

"This does not have to be an intentional act," they say. "Indeed, there seems to be little doubt that such imposition is usually an unintentional consequence of the assistant's belief that he or she is capable of eliciting communication in some special, inexplicable way."

"It is relevant to note in this context," they say, "that the DEAL philosophy encourages, if not demands, such beliefs to be held by their personnel....This mixture of expectation and enthusiasm is a volatile combination with which to equip untrained assistants when accountability for outcome is so low."

Their skepticism is supported by Randi, a professional magician who has made a career of investigating remarkable claims. Randi says that none of the children he watched could communicate when their facilitators did not know the answers to the questions they were asked; he claims that "these kids are human Ouija boards."

Gina Green, a U.S. researcher who recently visited several Australian programs, agrees; she describes F/C as an "insidious cult," and says that no scientific testing has confirmed its validity. Green, director of research at the New England Centre for Autism, personally evaluated two cases of F/C, and found that neither was genuine.

Biklen, however, argues that the charges that no studies have proven F/C to be a real phenomenon are "simply false," and says that "the [Victorian] government investigation did validate the communication of at least four individuals."

He argues in the *Advocate* against setting up scientific tests to verify the validity of F/C, saying that such testing could "undermine the [facilitated] person's confidence;" rather, he "looks for naturally occurring indicators [that F/C is valid], for example, information unknown to facilitators, or the same things typed to different facilitators who had not conversed with each other about the person or topic."

"Another good indicator," Biklen says, "is independent typing In addition individuals reveal their own unique personalities, their own patterns of creative and phonetic spellings and a more or less steady progression toward greater and greater complexity of communication—this would be hard for facilitators to orchestrate."

Bringing back Bettelheim?

In Australia, the use of F/C has been prohibited by a number of centers until the method's validity can be ascertained. In the U.S. and other countries, the use of F/C is growing rapidly—but so are concerns that it may hurt rather than help autistic children and their parents.

Schopler fears that the "F/C rhetoric and media hype" may bring back the days of Bruno Bettelheim and others who claimed that autistic children were normal children made psychotic by poor parenting. "Today," he says, "F/C ideologues deny the special needs of autism by claiming all such children to be endowed with a normal intelligence blocked by a cerebral-palsy-like speech impairment." He notes the many abuse allegations made on the basis of F/C, and says, "we can only hope that rationality and the rules of evidence will prevail."

"Autism and Assisted Communication: a response to Biklen," Robert Cummins and Margot Prior, *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 228-241. Address: Margot Prior, La Trobe University, Bundoora Victoria, Australia 3083.

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"Autism orthodoxy versus free speech: a reply to Cummins and Prior," Douglas Biklen, *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 242-256. Address: Douglas Biklen, Div. of Special Education, Syracuse University, 805 S. Crouse Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13244-2280.

—and—

"Editorial commentary," Eric Schopler, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 1992, pp.337-338. Address: Eric Schopler, Division TEACCH, Medical School Wing E, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

—and—

"See me, hear me, touch me," Joseph Shapiro, *U.S. News & World Report*, July 27, 1992.

—and—

"Questions and answers on Facilitated Communication," Douglas Biklen, *The Advocate*, Summer 1992, pp. 16-18.

—and—

"New ordeal for 'Carla' family," *The Sunday Age*, September 1992.

Query on periodic aggression

The parents of a 33-year-old autistic man write that their son gets extremely aggressive and violent every seven days, and they wonder if other parents or professionals have observed anything similar.

My first response was to suggest that exposure to a chemical which is used in his environment on a weekly basis, such as certain cleaning solvents, might be the cause. However, the seven-day cycle has appeared in different settings and different environments over an extended period of time.

Many years ago Dr. Walter Alvarez, the "Sherlock Holmes of medicine," told me that a pediatrician friend of his had asked why many children in his practice had "dumb Mondays." These children were reported by their teachers to be very slow and dull on Mondays, as opposed to the other days of the week. Alvarez, who himself had a chicken allergy, solved the puzzle for his friend by suggesting that the children were allergic to chicken, and were being given chicken as a traditional Sunday dinner (this was in the days before Colonel Sanders).

However, the parents of the 33-year-old say that an allergy to a certain food given one day a week is not likely to be the problem in the present instance. If you can shed light on the matter, write ARRI.

—B.R.

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