

## Facilitated Communication: What's going on?

Many parents of autistic children were disturbed by the article in ARRI 6/3 which reported a series of 13 consecutive court decisions (2 in the U.S., 11 in Australia) which rejected facilitated communication (F/C) as a credible vehicle for allegations of sexual or physical abuse. In letters and phone calls, a number of parents provided ARRI with what appeared to be irrefutable proof that their children do indeed communicate via F/C. Typical examples:

A child is asked, "What is your favorite flavor of yogurt?" Answer: "With cookie crumbs on top."

A child is asked, "What did you do over the weekend?" Answer: "We went to the gas station twice."

It is indeed hard to believe that these are just lucky guesses by the facilitators. The parents express confidence that the facilitators could not have known the answers.

ARRI does not need convincing that *some* non-speaking autistic children can communicate in writing. I have had first-hand encounters with such children, starting in the 1960s and 70s, and have written and lectured about them, for several decades. (See the letter typed by non-speaking Lucy Blackman, page 6.)

Professionals as well as parents were upset at the widespread skepticism about F/C. In Schenectady, New York, the staff of the O.D. Heck Developmental Center decided to provide the scientific proof that skeptics of F/C claimed was lacking. The O.D. Heck professional staff were among the first and most enthusiastic supporters of F/C. They attended F/C workshops at Syracuse University, then returned to Schenectady to spread the word with workshops of their own. They became the very active local resource for F/C and used the method with the approximately 50 autistic and autistic-like trainees at the center.

Their response to skepticism about F/C was to set up an airtight, rigorous scientific experimental evaluation of F/C, with everything videotaped. This would be the perfect, definitive study. They selected, from the 48 persons in the autism program, the 12 who were most experienced and skilled in F/C, and who had used F/C successfully for from 5 to 12 months. Nine of the 12 had produced complete sentences and conversations. These 12 subjects were facilitated by the 9 people who customarily facilitated with them on a daily basis. Being very much aware that advocates of F/C insist that autistic people tend to be reluctant to be tested, the experimenters, after explaining their study, not only got assurances of full and enthusiastic cooperation from both the facilitators and (through F/C) the autistic trainees, but were thanked for the opportunity to participate. The study design was simple. The facilitator and the autistic person, sitting side by side, were each shown a picture of a common object. A partition prevented the facilitator from seeing the pic-

ture shown to the autistic person, and vice versa. The autistic person's task was to name the object (foot, watch, keys, shoes, etc.) via F/C.

The findings were very clear, and shocked the experimenters: the only times the autistic persons typed out the correct answer were when the facilitator and the trainee

---

*Anecdotal reports say  
F/C is valid, but controlled  
studies indicate that  
facilitators, not autistic in-  
dividuals, are communicat-  
ing.*

---

were shown identical pictures. Furthermore, and this is critically important: when the two pictures were different, the autistic person, with the facilitator's guidance, sometimes typed the facilitator's picture—but never his or her own picture. So, the experimenters reluctantly concluded not only that F/C did not work, but that the facilitator was directing the responses of the trainee!

As reported earlier in ARRI, similar findings have been reported in small-scale, less formal trials in Australia, often under adversarial (court-ordered) circumstances, but this was a carefully designed, full-scale formal experiment conducted by people who firmly believed in F/C. And it is all on videotape.

When asked about the study on a recent radio broadcast, Douglas Biklen said it was a poor study because it required autistic persons to do "the most difficult task that one could ask the person with autism to do...word finding." "No, the study showed just the opposite," came the reply, "the autistic subjects proved to be very skilled at labelling—but only if the facilitators knew the answers."

The O.D. Heck report, issued in August, 1992, was quickly followed by a succession of similar reports from Australia, the U.S. and Denmark.

Alan Hudson of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and his colleagues reported their study on 8 disabled individuals who had been using F/C for 17 to 33 months. Each was asked a series of questions such as, "What is the name of your dog," or "What is the color of your sister's car?" The questions were audiotaped and played through earphones. Part of the time the subjects and the facilitators heard the same questions; other times each heard different questions.

The results were the same as in the O.D. Heck study. There was no evidence that any of the 8 persons could communicate, even with the help of their experienced

facilitators, except when the facilitators knew what the answer should be.

Hudson, who has been involved in a number of other studies of F/C in Australia, commented, in a letter to ARRI, "Some subjects [not in the above study] have indicated a reluctance to participate, but this was done **via facilitated communication**. There was, however, no indication that they were reluctant. In fact their non-verbal and sometimes verbal behavior suggested that they were quite enjoying the activities."

Another new study reported by Hudson is of special interest because its method was suggested by facilitators who complained that it was not fair to require subjects to produce single-word or short answers (the "labelling" or "word-finding" objections raised by Biklen and Crossley). In accordance with the suggestions made by the facilitators, experimenters permitted the facilitator to ask the subject questions about objects or events in a conversational, interactive mode. The findings were again negative. Hudson concluded, "There is no evidence, therefore, that F/C allows people to communicate..." He goes on to note that "when initially being shown the concrete objects, Subject 4 was able to verbally label all items. When using facilitated communica-

---

*ARI continues to receive  
report after report from  
horribly traumatized  
parents and teachers who  
have been accused of  
abuse via F/C.*

---

tion (during which he did not verbally mention the objects) there was nothing in the responses which vaguely resembled the objects. This was in spite of those responses being very lengthy."

Hudson observes that when another subject was asked a question which would have been answered correctly by a one-word answer (hamburger, or any other food) she typed instead (with the help of the facilitator, who did not know what had been asked): "dont put me through this hell help me so that I can communicate tell her to leave me alone." "While typing this facilitated response, the subject appeared quite relaxed and willing to participate..."

A study in Denmark of 17 subjects by Bente Beck and colleagues, using sophisticated electromyographic recordings of muscle and elbow movements during the F/C process, also produced no evidence that the subjects "were able to express their own willful statements by the assisted spelling."

According to Gina Green, Director of Research for the New England Center for  
continued on page 3