

**EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.****Facilitated Communication: a light at the end of the tunnel?**

The controversy over F/C continues to grow at a furious pace. Every day the phone, the fax and the mail bring in more evidence of the turmoil. Just within the past few days, the news included:

—A fax from Australia informing us that the government has cut \$204,000 from the funding received by DEAL, the agency run by Rosemary Crossley. (Crossley is a leading proponent of F/C.) The seven staff members were given 16 days, until September 30th, to find alternate placements for the 200 disabled people using the Center. Rosemary Crossley is quoted as denying any wrongdoing; Professor Alan Hudson is quoted as saying he has concluded that F/C is a sham.

—A clipping from a Pennsylvania newspaper telling of a million-dollar lawsuit entered by the Callahan family against a facilitator, school officials, and others responsible for sexual abuse allegations, now dismissed, which resulted in their teenage son being taken from their home.

—A press release from PBS announcing an hour-long special on the F/C controversy to be aired October 19 on *Frontline*. *60 Minutes*, NBC's *Now* and several other networks call to ask for past ARRI issues on the F/C controversy.

—A call from a lawyer in Colorado seeking help for his clients, a retired couple whose 41-year-old Down syndrome son has reportedly accused them of sexual abuse via F/C. The son, who has uttered only four words in his life, has reportedly made the allegations with perfect spelling, grammar and punctuation. First the lawyer wants to have the charges dismissed by discrediting F/C, then he wishes to sue the facilitator and her superiors.

—A clipping from New York telling of an 11-year-old girl who purportedly used F/C to accuse her parents of sexual abuse. She is to be tested by the judge to see if she was "the true author of her typewritten communications." In the courtroom test, the facilitator will be "blind or deaf," the judge says.

Despite the furor, there is some reason to hope that the debate will abate, at least a little. A major problem has been that Doug Biklen has been excessively enthusiastic about F/C and has oversold it. Recently, perhaps in response to the ever-increasing series of almost uniformly negative studies (only 11 marginally positive results out of 285 handicapped subjects; see table on page 7), Biklen has begun backing away from the original claims that were, in many cases, simply outlandish. In the May, 1993 issue of the TASH Newsletter, Biklen, without fanfare, began distancing himself from five of the most troublesome claims:

1. The 100% claim. In his initial talks and interviews, Biklen asserted that 100%, or nearly 100%, could "facilitate." Forty-one of the first 43 autistic children were said to have "facilitated" to some degree; most were said to be "fluent." In his TASH Newsletter

article, Biklen takes a much more modest position: Facilitated Communication "can be useful for *many people* who do not speak, or whose speech is highly limited . . ." Some people, including me, felt that Biklen's "100%" put too much pressure on facilitators who felt that if they failed to elicit meaningful writing from the child, it must be their fault, since Biklen had stated that all, or virtually all, autistic children could use F/C.

2. "Who do not speak." I have been told by many parents and facilitators that even if the child is able to speak, one should pay little heed to his or her spoken words, but

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instead should believe what is typed with the aid of a facilitator. That belief is part of the lore of F/C. Biklen's willingness to recognize that F/C is *not* the preferred mode of communication for people who do speak is a welcome departure from an unjustifiable position.

3. "Who cannot point independently and reliably." It has been widely recognized for many decades that the vast majority of autistic persons are quite unimpaired with regard to their finger dexterity and gross motor capabilities. They have in fact often been described as especially dexterous and coordinated. The literature abounds with stories of young autistic children who can take apart and reassemble small mechanical devices, build towers of blocks and dominos higher than a normal adult can, assemble jig saw puzzles and climb to dangerously high places without falling. The files of the Autism Research Institute contain over 17,000 questionnaires completed by the parents of autistic children. Finger dexterity is one question we've asked about since 1965. Most parents indicate that their children are average or above in the use of their hands. The idea that autism is, or typically involves, a "movement disorder" is simply ludicrous. By now limiting the applicability of F/C to people who "cannot point independently and reliably," Biklen greatly reduces the base population on whom it makes sense to try F/C. If the kids can hit the keys by themselves, why do they need someone's hand supporting them and pulling their hands back?

4. "Goal is independent typing." Perhaps

it is not Biklen's fault, but there has been much too little emphasis on this *goal* of F/C. If the goal of F/C is really *independent* typing, and this were sufficiently appreciated by the F/C practitioners, there would undoubtedly have been many fewer false allegations of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, many practitioners seem to think that the byproduct of the F/C process, namely written communications with someone else's hand being intimately involved in the process, is what they are trying to achieve, rather than something they are trying to phase out.

5. "Looking at the keyboard." In his TASH article, Biklen states that it is "an important aspect of F/C" to "ensure that individuals look at the keyboard or other target." Until now the F/C lore, promoted by Biklen himself, had been that autistic children had such superb peripheral vision and/or such extraordinary spatial memory that they could look into space, or around the room, without paying attention to the keyboard. Even an experienced touch typist cannot type without looking at the keyboard if his fingers are not started on the home keys initially. If autistic children fail to look at the keyboard while they are facilitating, two things are true: a) they have no idea what "they" are typing; and b) they will never learn how to type independently, the supposed goal of F/C.

It is good that Biklen has made these changes in his initial position. That shows some much-needed flexibility. There are several other issues that he should also address if he wishes to make peace with his many critics. These include:

1. Opposition to testing. No one likes to be tested. To insist that autistic children are unique in this regard does not make sense. Further, teaching a person anything—reading, writing, driving, etc.—requires testing at every stage. No one is immune from being tested.

2. Instant literacy. The claim that all or almost all autistic children, or even normal children for that matter, can read and spell and write, without being taught, is not credible. (See our editorial, "Let's teach the kids to read," ARRI 6/3.)

3. Sophistication of content. The small number of autistic individuals who have been able to demonstrate some competence in the studies of F/C to date appear able only to answer simple questions, name objects, letters, colors, etc. Absent are individuals who can make philosophical observations about the state of the world, or produce other claimed linguistically sophisticated output.

Maybe, just maybe, the application of a little moderation will help bridge the gap between the converts and the critics.