

FACILITATED COMMUNICATION

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many people with severe intellectual disability and/or Autism Spectrum Disorders are unable to use language to communicate.

PROPOSED SOLUTION/ INTERVENTION

Facilitated communication (FC) is a process whereby a "facilitator" assists a person to use a keyboard or a letter board. The facilitator provides physical support to the hand or arm of the person being facilitated. FC was popular in the early 1990's and has recently come to attention in a supportive article in Time magazine.

THE THEORETICAL RATIONALE – HOW DOES IT WORK?

Proponents of FC claim people with severe disabilities may have intact language comprehension skills and undiscovered literacy skills, which will enable them to type as a means of communication and disclose their true intellectual capacities. The support provided by the facilitator in stabilising the hand, isolating the finger and pulling the hand back after each letter is claimed to help overcome motor planning difficulties. There have also been remarkable claims by prominent proponents that FC involves mind reading on the part of the person with a disability.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY? WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE FOR THEIR EFFICACY?

Well-controlled studies have consistently shown that the content of the communication is almost always

from the facilitator. For example, if the facilitator and the person being facilitated are shown different pictures, and the facilitated person is asked to name the picture, the name will be of the picture shown to the facilitator. There is no suggestion that facilitators are knowingly influencing the output but self-deception appears to be involved. There are a small number of people who have progressed to independent typing, but these typically have some speech skills. The potential for harm with FC is greater than for some other ineffective interventions and may include unsubstantiated abuse allegations and denial of access to other effective communication options.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no substantial scientific evidence to support the use of FC with persons with severe disabilities. Several professional organisations (e.g., American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Pediatrics) have advised against its use.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

A range of augmentative communication options exist for people with severe disabilities. It is also possible to teach literacy to many individuals using well-verified teaching techniques, without resort to FC.

THE MUSEC VERDICT: NOT RECOMMENDED.

Key references may be found at:
www.aces.mq.edu.au/musec_co_brief.asp

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