

Facilitated Communicating/ Supported Typing

Facilitated Communicating (FC) is a method of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) that is also called Supported Typing (ST). A facilitator or communication assistant provides varying degrees of physical support, as well as emotional and communicative support, to the user of a communication aid. Such aids range from simple boards with numbers and alphabet letters to computerized devices with voice, display and printed output and can include arrays of pictorial symbols or photographs. The most common method involves the facilitator or assistant providing physical support in the form of backward pressure as the communicator focuses on reaching forward to touch or type on the device.

The form of support required varies with each individual and has been likened to learning to dance together. For some people, a touch on the shoulder is enough; others may need help in isolating the index finger with which they point to letters or press the keyboard. As the individual progresses, the goal is effective and independent communication. Even when users do not achieve independent typing, FC can be a strategy to improve motor skills so they can make choices by pointing to or touching objects, pictures, letters, words or phrases.

FC techniques took the Autism world by storm in the early 1990s. First recognized in Australia in the 1980s, to help children and adults with cerebral palsy to communicate, it was introduced to North America in 1990. In the early months and years, it seemed that it might be the key to unlock expressive communication abilities in most children and adults with Autism. FC seemed to help particularly adults and children who had not been able to speak because of their Autism. There were astonishing reports of people presumed to be severely intellectually disabled being able to spell out complex messages. Some have been able with FC to break out of their isolation and to show clearly that "though they cannot speak, they have things to say." Those who have been fortunate to reach expertise and resources have been able to develop independence in typing. Some have been able to continue in literacy and further education programs, and a few have graduated from college.

However, widespread misunderstanding of how FC works also led to controversy and backlash. Qualitative and controlled studies have shown that FC is useful for some individuals, but also that some facilitators may influence what some communicators type. Some studies concluded that the validity and reliability of FC were not established. There was debate over whether quantitative (controlled) or qualitative (ethnographic) methodologies are most appropriate for the study of human social interaction, communication in general, and FC in particular. The largest quantitative validation study to date reports that, under controlled conditions, some FC users can pass information to a facilitator when that facilitator is not privy to the information. A critical factor in studies with positive outcomes is that students had prior practice sessions in message passing. So they knew in advance the rules of the experiment, rather than being taken by surprise.

More sensational were messages by a few FC users that were interpreted as allegations of abuse by parents or caregivers. Threats of lawsuits against agencies, school boards and

communication professionals led to defensive reactions that made it very hard for people who do not speak to get expert help with any communication modes. In Ontario in 1996, the College of Audiologists and Speech Language Pathologists (CASLPO) forbade its members to consult to and advise people about FC. This position has now been modified, so that speech language clinicians may again provide advice and guidance. But a clinician who feels that FC would be appropriate for an individual must go through an informed consent procedure that includes information on the negative results of some of the validity research.

Two major centres of support in this form of AAC are the DEAL Communication Centre, in the Australian State of Victoria, where Dr Rosemary Crossley first developed the practice and theory of FC, and the Facilitated Communication Institute at Syracuse University, founded by Dr Douglas Biklen who introduced FC to North American in 1992.

For a survey of FC and validation tests, see D. Biklen and D.N. Cardinal, *Contested Words, Contested Science: Unraveling the Facilitated Communication Controversy* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1997). Some adults who have received help with **Supported Typing** have been able to progress to independent typing and speech has also been stimulated in some cases. Seven impressive communicators express themselves in the book *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (edited by D. Biklen, New York University Press, 2005).

Ontario has the Bridges-Over-Barriers support group started by and for adults with Autism who use Supported Typing to share their successes, struggles and strategies. See the Bridges webpage on the OAARSN site: <http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Bridges-2007.html>