

Statement on Facilitated Communication

A task force authorized by the Executive Council of the Association for Behavior Analysis has generated the following statement concerning the technique called Facilitated Communication (FC). Members of the task force independently reviewed the scientific literature concerning FC and agreed unanimously to the content of the statement. The Executive Council has unanimously approved the statement, and it is the official position of the Association for Behavior Analysis.

A technique, known as Facilitated Communication (FC), has been promoted and disseminated as a method for “revealing” undisclosed intellectual competence in persons diagnosed with autism, moderate to profound mental retardation, or other disabilities. FC is a technique wherein a facilitator touches the hand, arm, or shoulder of a person with communication deficits while they jointly point to symbols, letters, or words. Claims have been made that this technique permits many people with severe disabilities to communicate at levels far exceeding those demonstrated by any other means. These claims have been based on descriptive and qualitative reports or personal accounts. Numerous peer-reviewed scientific evaluations, however, indicate clearly and compellingly that FC does not allow persons diagnosed with disabilities to communicate at enhanced levels. The source of apparent communication is the facilitator, although most facilitators report that they are not aware that they are the source.

To date, there is no objective, scientifically sound evidence that FC has any direct therapeutic benefit. The use of FC to “communicate” entails serious risks, including: 1) Violating the rights of people with disabilities to autonomy, privacy, genuine self-expression, self-determination, protection from experimentation without informed consent, and appropriate education and treatment; 2) Promoting dependence rather than independence in people with disabilities; 3) Misusing human and material resources that could be better spent on other interventions, e.g., time spent employing FC interferes with the use of communication systems that have a scientifically documented history of success; 4) Fostering expectations about people with disabilities that are unlikely to be realized; 5) Taking actions related to medical or other treatments, living and work arrangements, personal relationships, test and classroom performance, and other decisions about people with disabilities without objective verification that the communications represent their own wishes and competencies; 6) Promulgating false allegations of abuse and mistreatment, resulting in emotional distress and unnecessary legal and financial difficulties for many people with disabilities, their families and others. Thus the use of FC directly threatens the human and civil rights of the person whose communication is purportedly “facilitated,” and may also jeopardize the rights of others.

Autism, mental retardation, and other disabilities can result in diverse and often marked deleterious effects on adaptive behavioral development and communication skills. Parents and other caregivers of persons manifesting these conditions consequently are highly motivated to seek and obtain service that offers any promise of being effective in ameliorating these conditions. As a result, such caregivers are vulnerable to those who promote ineffective methods.

FC is not to be confused with use of appropriately applied manual guidance or other prompts to teach communications and other skills, nor should it be confused with independent use of nonspeech communication systems that may involve letterboards, keyboards, or other symbol systems.

It is the position of the Association for Behavior Analysis that FC is a discredited technique. Because of the absence of ample, objective, scientific evidence that FC is beneficial and that identifies the specific conditions under which it may be used with benefit, its use is unwarranted and unethical.