



Position Statement on the Use of Facilitated Communication

VALID regrets any distress this Position Statement might cause to those who have a belief in the use of Facilitated Communication. However, we believe we have a responsibility to publicly explain our concerns, and to ask that people examine the evidence – giving particular weight to the extensive body of independent and peer-reviewed research.

'Facilitated Communication (FC) involves a communication partner providing physical support to a person to (actively) guide their arm and hand in the use of a symbol board or electronic keyboard. FC remains controversial, as it is often unclear whether the message can be rightly attributed to the person with disability, or if it is significantly influenced by the facilitator. Research has not yet established its validity as an acceptable AAC technique...' 'Guidelines for the development, implementation & review of communication support systems for persons with an intellectual disability & complex communication needs'

[NSW Department of Ageing, Disability & Home Care, October 2002]

'...Consequently, specific activities contribute immediate threats to the individual civil and human rights of the person with autism or severe mental retardation. These include the use of facilitated communication...'

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA adopts the position that facilitated communication is a controversial and unproved communicative procedure with no scientifically demonstrated support for its efficacy.'

[The American Psychiatric Association Council of Representatives, 1994]

'Numerous empirically based, peer-reviewed studies have demonstrated that facilitated communication is incapable of establishing "unexpected literacy" or producing valid messages above the facilitated individual's previously established communicative level'

[Resolution of the Behaviour Analysis Association of Michigan, 1998]

As an advocacy group for people with intellectual disability, VALID's primary concern is to empower people to assert their rights and to be free from all forms of manipulation, exploitation and abuse. VALID is deeply concerned that despite consistent independent, empirical evidence against the use of 'Facilitated Communication', the practice still continues without appropriate safeguards.

1. VALID strongly endorses and encourages the development, scientific validation, and use of assistive and augmentative communication techniques and demonstrably effective treatments designed to establish functional independent living skills in all persons with disabilities:

*UNCRPD Article 21: Freedom of expression and opinion
'Governments should take steps to ensure that disabled people can express their views freely and access information on an equal basis to everyone else.'*¹

2. VALID believes that the use of any assistive or augmentative communication technique—including the occasional use of physical prompting—must be based upon clear, objective, and scientifically valid evidence that the communications of any individual are reliably and unambiguously attributable to that individual.

3. While VALID respects the right of people to believe in alternative methods of communication we do not accept they have the right to impose their practices on vulnerable people without proper accountability, transparency and independent scrutiny.

4. VALID is concerned that the personal or professional interests of those who are practising or promoting Facilitated Communication might sometimes be in conflict with the rights and interests of the person with a disability:

*UNCRPD Article 12: Equal recognition before the law
'If decisions are made that relate to a person's capacity to understand, then there must be safeguards against abuse... someone else should only be speaking for you to the extent that it is necessary and for as long as is appropriate. There should be a regular and independent review of the steps taken to make sure that there is no conflict of interest and that the disabled person's rights and interests are properly respected.'*²

5. The overwhelming research evidence indicates that Facilitated Communication emanates from the facilitator and not the client and should therefore be referred to as 'automatic' or 'false communication' not facilitated communication:

'In automatic communication, the messages are produced by the facilitator without the disabled individual being aware of this. In false communication, the messages are consciously produced by facilitators in order to somehow meet their own ends.'

[Facilitated, automatic and false communication', Stephen Tetzchner, European Journal of Special Needs Education, Vol. 11 No. 2 1996]

*'Less than 20 years ago, 'facilitated communication'', an ethically shocking variant of spirit communication, was introduced to autism research and the broader community of psychotherapists... Here, patients suffering from a pervasive communication disorder were abused as writing devices...' Brugger, P. and C. Mohr, *The Paranormal Mind*, 2008.*

'Dr Phemister verbally estimates the probability that the facilitator produced the statements, whether consciously or not, at 99%'. [Victorian Ombudsman's Report February 1994]

'These results reveal FC to be an invalid treatment with great potential to have harmful psychological and social side effects.' ['Evidence-Based Communication Assessment and Intervention', Ralf W. and Wendt, Oliver, 2008]

In the USA, a 1993 Frontline documentary exposed Facilitated Communication as an unreliable and unproven methodology. Featured at the 44 minute mark of this report is Dr Rosemary Crossley allegedly facilitating the communication of a man in a coma.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3439467496200920717#>

References to a range of position statements, along with a comprehensive list of research papers and studies on the use of FC can be found at:

www.valid.org.au/FCPosition

6 VALID believes people with a disability have the right to be free from all forms of abuse:

*UNCRPD Article 16: Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse
'Governments must do everything they can to protect disabled people from all forms of exploitation... and abuse at home and in the community... Article 16 says that there needs to be independent monitoring of facilities and programmes for disabled people...'*³

7. VALID believes people with a disability have the right to be accepted for who they are – and not as others might represent them to be:

*UNCRPD Article 17: Protecting the integrity of the person
'Every disabled person has the same right as anyone else to respect for their physical and mental integrity... This means that disabled people's minds and bodies are their own. No one should ever treat a disabled person as less of a person or interfere with their minds and bodies. People have the right to be respected by others just as they are.'*⁴

8. VALID is concerned that FC practices, rather than serving to unlock the potential of people with a disability, might actually serve to obscure and oppress the development of their true character and identity. The use of any techniques or methods that do not have peer-reviewed and scientific validation risk abusing the inherent dignity and rights of vulnerable persons with a disability:

'Well-meaning facilitators who unconsciously speak for the disabled do so at the expense of being sensitive to more subtle behavioural cues that can effectively communicate an individual's wants and needs. Not since the days of warehouse institutionalization have the disabled experienced as much powerlessness and loss of autonomy as they do with well-meaning facilitators today.'

[Facilitated Communication in America,' Brian Gorman, 1998]

9. VALID does not support or endorse the use of Facilitated Communication as a form of therapy, communications system, or as a means of making important life decisions. In particular, communication arising from the use of Facilitated Communication should not be used to confirm or deny accusations of abuse, neglect, or other crimes, and should not be used to make decisions concerning guardianship or administration, treatment, diagnosis, housing, or custody.

10. VALID therefore believes that:

- Anyone considering the use of Facilitated Communication should examine the extensive independent evidence.
- Family members and supporters of people using Facilitated Communication should seek independent assessment, advice and advocacy.
- The Victorian Government, through DHS, must develop a set of firm and clear policy guidelines to protect people with a disability from potential exploitation and abuse through Facilitated Communication and other unreliable and un-validated practices.

^{1,2,3,4:} *Equality and Human Rights Commission Guidance*
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights>