

INFORMATION ON FACILITATED COMMUNICATION TRAINING IN VERMONT

- Facilitated communication (FC) is supported as part of a total communication approach where an individual may use several methods of communication. FC is not promoted as the best or only method of communication for people with severe communication difficulties nor is it promoted at the expense of using other methods of communication that could benefit an individual. The decision to use FC should be based on careful assessment and should be integrated with other methods of communication. When making recommendations about the use of FC for a particular individual, we stress that there is an intensive training process for the individual and his/her facilitators.

- Our understanding of the facilitated communication (FC) is that it is a strategy that can help people to overcome motor and movement difficulties which affect their ability to access communication aids such as boards and devices. **FC is a training process where individuals work towards becoming as independent as possible in their communication.** There are a number of individuals across the country who have become independent in their typing. One example is a young woman with a label of severe mental retardation from California named Sue Rubin who currently attends Whittier College. She began her use of FC with intensive support at her hand and wrist. Over a period of several years, with consistent support from family members and high school support staff, she has been able to type independently. She has done this in a keynote presentation to 1500 people at the 1998 national TASH conference as well as other local and nationally recognized conferences. Most recently she was the subject of a CNN documentary, AUTISM IS A WORLD.

- Our efforts in supporting facilitated communication (FC) in Vermont have focused on providing training and technical assistance to ensure that the technique is used appropriately. We do not endorse the use of FC by people who have not received the necessary training. This training needs to be intensive and ongoing. We strongly advise that new facilitators work under the supervision of an experienced facilitator.

- In 2000 the, Facilitated Communication Training Standards, were disseminated to assist people in implementing the use of the technique correctly. The task force that developed was composed of educators, speech language pathologists, university researchers, human service professionals, and family members and individuals who use FC. The guidelines provide guidance on best practices, facilitator competency, FC user skill development, technical assistance, and training models.

- We make every effort to stay abreast of new information and research on FC. Our analysis of the research has shown that there are scientifically controlled studies that have demonstrated positive results in terms of the validity of FC. Three such studies are Cardinal, Hanson and Wakeham (1996), Weiss, Wagner and Bauman (1996) and Sheehan and Matuozzi (1996). All three studies were published in well-known, professionally recognized journals, the Journal of Mental Retardation. In the Cardinal study, the lead researcher, Donald Cardinal was a professor of special education from Chapman University who has extensive experience in quantitative research. In

the Weiss, et al. study, one of the researchers is Margaret Bauman who is the leading neurophysiologist nationally on autism. Although it appears that the number of studies that prove FC to be "invalid" far outweigh those that demonstrate positive results, the design of studies is an important contributing factor as to whether FC users are successful in doing validity tests. Researchers involved in the studies with positive results learned that FC users can be successful with tests if test conditions incorporate such factors as extensive practice of a test, use of natural environments for testing, e.g. home, school, etc., use of familiar, experienced facilitators, use of a variety of validity tasks, and provision of feedback to the FC user on performance.

- We do recognize that there is considerable disagreement in the professional community about the use of FC. We know that national professional organizations have taken positions on the use of FC. In Vermont, we have chosen to follow the guidelines of TASH (the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) that were developed for augmentative communication and facilitated communication (TASH resolutions adopted in 1992, 1994, and 2006). TASH views access to all forms of alternative communication including FC as a basic individual right. However, they strongly encourage the "careful, reflective use of facilitated communication" and emphasize the importance of training and new research.
- We do agree those individuals who use FC need to demonstrate that they are the authors of their communication. Through the use of a communication portfolio, instances where an individual validates their communication e.g. shares information that their facilitator does not know about, can be documented over time. We also recommend that an individual's team document progress on independence, working with multiple facilitators, message passing, and literacy skills. We believe that through careful observation and documentation (developing a personal portfolio), the effectiveness of FC for an individual can be evaluated.

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