



Facilitated Communication: A Cruel Farce

My previous column was about the myth, so vigorously promoted by Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, that autism is caused by “refrigerator mothers”—mothers with cold, unloving personalities. During the past two decades other preposterous myths about autism have flourished. One is the widespread belief among agonized parents that their child’s autism is caused by early vaccinations. Because there is not a shred of evidence for this, I shall not waste space on it here. My topic is a much more pervasive, more cruel myth—the belief that hiding inside the head of every child with autism, no matter how severe, is a normal child whose intelligent thoughts can emerge through a curious technique called facilitated communication (FC).

Here’s how FC works. An autistic child is seated at a typewriter or computer keyboard, or perhaps just a sheet of paper with the keyboard drawn on it. (Although autism strikes both sexes,

Martin Gardner has two new books of essays: Did Adam and Eve Have Navels? Discourses on Reflexology, Numerology, Urine Therapy, and Other Dubious Subjects (W.W. Norton, 2000), based on his SKEPTICAL INQUIRER Notes of a Fringe-Watcher columns; and From the Wandering Jew to William F. Buckley Jr.: On Science, Literature, and Religion (Prometheus Books, 2000), a collection of his other essays and reviews.

males outnumber females four to one so I shall use the pronoun “he” for any child with severe autism.) A therapist, usually a woman, is called the child’s “facilitator.” She asks the child a question, then grasps his hand, wrist, or elbow—usually the hand—while the child extends his index finger and begins to type. The belief is that the child has the ability to communicate intelligent thoughts by typing, but lacks the muscular coordination needed for finding the right keys. The facilitator assists him in locating the keys she is sure he intends to hit.

A wondrous miracle now seems to take place. Although the child has been thought to be mentally retarded, unable to read, write, or speak coherently, he types out lucid, sophisticated messages that could only come from a normal, intelligent child.

This amazing technique was discovered in the early 1970s by Rosemary Crossley, of Melbourne, Australia. Educated only in the liberal arts, she and her associates founded the Dignity Through Education and Language Communication Center in Melbourne. Crossley is the author of numerous papers in technical journals, and a book titled *Annie’s Coming Out* about one of her patients.

Enter Douglas Biklen, a professor of education at Syracuse University. When he first visited Crossley in the late 1980s he was skeptical of her methods, but soon became convinced that she had hit

upon a revolutionary new technique. Today he considers her his “dear friend” and mentor. Back at Syracuse, Biklen founded the Facilitated Communication Institute, and quickly became the nation’s top guru in promoting FC. Thousands of therapists have been trained in FC at his institute.

FC spread like wildfire across the nation and abroad. Dozens of FC centers were established around the U.S. where parents, for a sizeable fee, could bring a child with autism and have his normal mind released from the prison of his terrible disorder.

You can imagine the excitement and euphoria of parents long desperate for rational conversation with a loved child. They often wept with joy when they became convinced that their child could say to them through typing, “I love you, mom” or “I love you, dad.” Not only that, but they typed long meaningful sentences, using words they were incapable of speaking. Some even wrote poetry.

This seemingly miraculous breakthrough was enthusiastically endorsed by the print and electronic media. Articles praising FC appeared in newspapers and popular magazines. *Reader’s Digest* (March 1993) published “The Secret Life of Arthur Wold,” a moving account of a child released by FC from the glass shell believed to have imprisoned his mind. Movies and television shows lauded the new technique.

That something was terribly wrong

with FC was obvious from the start to almost all psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and psychologists familiar with autism. For one thing, while the poor child was typing brilliant messages, he almost never looked at the keyboard. He would glance around the room, often smiling or giggling as if having fun, sometimes screaming, sometimes closing his eyes.

Skeptics checked with expert typists. Not one was capable of typing a sentence with one finger unless he or she could see the keyboard. This made no impression on facilitators or parents eager to believe. Therapists made the absurd claim that their children had the wonderful ability to memorize the keyboard so completely that they did not need to see it when they typed! Children with severe autism, unable to read, write, or speak clearly, found themselves in schools where they passed examinations in literature, arithmetic, and other subjects provided, of course, a facilitator was beside them, guiding their hand!

It quickly became obvious to everyone not caught up in the FC fad that the facilitators, although totally sincere, were naive and poorly trained. They were unaware of the strength of what is called the Ouija (or ideomotor) effect. Unconsciously they were guiding a child's finger to keys they imagined the child was seeking. In brief, it was they, not their patients, who did the typing.

As one would expect, because guiding a finger to a key is seldom accurate, the children's messages swarm with typos. Here are some typical examples reported by Biklen:

I AMN NOT A UTISTIVC ON
THJE TYP.

MY MOTHER FEELS IM STUPID
BECAUSE IH CANT USE MY
VOICE PROPERLY.

I AM VERY UPSET BECAUSE I
NEED FACILITASON. I DONT
WANT TO DEPEND ON PEOPLE.

I AI DONT WANT TO BE AUTIS-
TIC. NOBODY REALLY ZUN-
DERSTANDS WHAT IT FEELS
LIKE. IT IS VERY LONELY AND I
FEEL LOUSY. MY MOOD IS BAD
A LOT. I FEEL LESS LONELI
WHEN I AM WITH KIDS.

Is it possible to prove beyond any

doubt that facilitators do the typing? Indeed, it is so ridiculously easy that promoters of FC must be simple-minded not to have thought of such simple tests. In one early test, made by skeptics, the child and his facilitator wore headphones. When a question was heard by both child and facilitator, the child typed a reasonable response. But when only the child heard the question, while the facilitator heard only music, the child's answer had no bearing on the question.

A simple visual test was even more dramatic. A picture on a cardboard folder was shown to both child and facilitator. The child accurately typed the target's name when his hand was held. In a repeat test, the experimenter showed the facilitator a picture, but this time, as he turned the folder so only the child could see the target, he secretly moved a flap that covered the first picture and exposed a different one. You can guess what happened. The child did not type the name of the picture he saw. He typed the name of the picture that only the facilitator had seen.

This definitive, unimpeachable test was featured in a marvelous documentary, "Prisoners of Silence," aired by the PBS series *Frontline* in October 1993. Many facilitators were devastated by the revelation that they had been deceiving themselves for years. One female therapist, interviewed by *Frontline*, was in tears.

The Ouija effect is far more powerful than most people realize. It explains why the planchette, in response to questions, glides so smoothly over the Ouija board to spell answers which seem to come from spirits. It is the secret behind rotating dowsing rods, table tipping, and automatic writing. Entire books have been written by hands that seem to be moved by spirit controls.

You can demonstrate the Ouija effect easily by tying a ring, or some other small weight, to a piece of string. Tell a friend that if she holds this little pendulum over a man's hand it will swing back and forth in a straight line. Held over a woman's hand it swings in ovals. You'll be surprised by how often this works, provided of course a person is told how the weight will swing.

In the late 1990s FC took an ugly

turn. Overzealous facilitators, oblivious to the fact they they were doing the typing, began to produce messages accusing parents of sexually molesting their child! These messages often contained graphic four-letter obscene words. It is hard to believe, but uninformed police and judges, on the basis of such accusations, actually arrested dozens of innocent and astounded fathers. Some even went to jail for months, exhausting fortunes on legal defenses before enlightened judges tossed their cases out of court.

A recent case in England, reported in London newspapers on July 12, 1999, involved a teenage boy with a mental age of two who was suffering from extreme autism and unable to speak. With a hand guided by a facilitator he had typed accusations of sexual abuse by his fifty-year-old father. The boy was made a ward of the court until the court found no evidence of abuse. The judge, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, branded FC a dangerous, unverified technique that should never be used again in any British court to support sexual abuse charges.

In 1992 a group of facilitators at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, became convinced that some of their children were gifted with psychic powers. For example, while they typed with their hand held, their sentences often revealed what their facilitator was thinking. Suspecting ESP, the facilitators began giving their children tests for telepathy. They would show a child a picture, for example of an elephant. Another child, in a distant room, would type "elephant" when asked what picture the other child had seen. Of course both facilitators knew the target was an elephant. The Madison facility was and is headed by Anne M. Donnellan, a professor of education with forty years of working with autistic children. Convinced that her patients had psychic abilities, she invited magician and psi-buster James Randi to visit Madison and evaluate the ESP evidence.

Randi realized at once, even before making the trip from his home in Florida to Madison, what was going on. The facilitators, not the children, were doing the typing. Naturally it would seem that the typing child was reading

their mind. The apparent ESP was explained by the fact that the facilitators were communicating with each other. In a letter to me before he left Florida, Randi predicted correctly that if he made a few simple tests in which the facilitator at the receiving end did not know the target, and no ESP took place, he would be met with strong resistance from the therapists. He would be accused of destroying ESP by his skepticism and his insulting experiments.

Randi's first test was to shuffle a set of cards with different pictures, then randomly select a card. A facilitator was asked to leave the room while Randi showed the picture to her child and to everyone else in the room. When the facilitator returned, held the child's hand, and asked him to name the picture he had seen, he typed only incorrect names. Similar tests for telepathy were also total failures. The receiving child was correct only when his facilitator knew the target.

As Randi anticipated, no one at the Madison facility welcomed his disclosures. The children too, their hands held, began to type such messages as "I don't like this man from Florida. He is upsetting my facilitator. Send him home."

"No one would like more than I to find that I am wrong," Randi wrote to me in his first letter. (At Madison he sent me daily reports of his investigations.) "It would be thrilling indeed to discover that autistic children, far from being incapable, isolated and mentally inferior . . . are actually capable of much more and only need to be released from their imprisonment."

Now that FC has been so thoroughly discredited, one would hope that FC leaders would admit they had been duped, and like the Arabs in Longfellow's "Day is Done," would fold their tents and silently steal away. Alas, true believers in a bogus science seldom change their minds or admit their mistakes. Biklen is still at Syracuse University, running his institute, and still convincing parents that hidden inside the glass shell of autism there is a bright, normal child who loves them and is eager to converse with them provided his hand is held by a facilitator. I should add that of course children with only mild autism can be taught to type rational

messages without any help, and can grow up to lead normal, constructive lives.

Through high-priced seminars, and sales of videotapes and literature, it is estimated that Biklen is bringing millions of dollars annually to his university. This cannot, however, be the only reason why Kenneth Shaw, the president of Syracuse University, has made no effort to maneuver Biklen off the campus. He not only defends Biklen on the grounds that a university must allow free opinions to be held by any faculty member, but he also has defended Biklen's competence. "[Biklen] has had the intellectual rigour," Shaw told a reporter, "one would expect of qualitative research in this area."

Biklen has had no training in psychology, psychiatry, or work with the disabled. His doctorate at Syracuse was in sociology. His books include *Unbound: How Facilitated Communication is Challenging Traditional Views of Autism and Ability/Disability* (1993), and *Contested Words, Contested Science: Unraveling the Facilitated Communication Controversy* (1997). Both books were published by Columbia University's Teachers College Press. His institute publishes a periodical titled *Facilitator Communication Digest*.

Biklen's present position on FC is that some facilitators, inadequately trained, have unwittingly guided a child's hand, but he thinks they are a small minority. On his Web site in June 2000 he warned: "Facilitated Communication should never involve guiding a person as he or she attempts to point or type."

Donnellan edited *Classic Readings in Autism* (1985), published by Teacher's College Press. Her latest book, written in collaboration with Martha Leary, is *Movement Differences and Diversity in Autism/Mental Retardation* (1997), published by the DRI Press, Madison. Like Biklen, she grants that the Ouija effect may explain some of the typing by children with autism, but she firmly believes that the effect can be avoided by well-trained facilitators, and that most of the criticism of FC is unfounded.

In 1994 the American Psychological Association and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association each declared that FC is

without scientific validation.

In recent years the belief that therapists, using hypnosis and other techniques, could revive memories of childhood sexual abuse sent many innocent parents and teachers to prison. The tide began to turn when parents began suing therapists for fabricating such memories, and many of the prison sentences have been overturned by enlightened judges.

The same thing is happening, though on a smaller scale, with fathers falsely accused of sexually molesting a child because of information a child types with a hand held by a facilitator. Lawsuits against FC centers and increasing awareness of the Ouija effect by judges have now almost eliminated such cruel charges. Although a voodoo science seldom completely evaporates, one can hope that the FC farce, involving a mysterious malady more pervasive around the world than Down's syndrome, is finally coming to an end.

References for Further Reading

The literature on FC, pro and con, is vast, with hundreds of technical papers. I list here a few popular articles and one book that are not hard to access, and which will reinforce the opinions expressed in this column:

- Anguished Silence and Helping Hands. James Mulick, John Jacobson, and Frank Kobie, in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Vol 17 (Spring 1993), pages 270-280.
- Facilitated Communication, Autism, and Ouija. Kathleen Dillon, in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Vol. 17 (Spring 1993), pages 281-287.
- Facilitated Communication: Mental Miracle or Sleight of Hand? Gina Green, in *Skeptic*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1994), pages 69-76. Green is director of the New England Center for Autism, in Massachusetts.
- Effectiveness of Facilitated Communication with Children and Youth with Autism. Richard Simpson and associates, in *The Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 28 (1995), pages 424-439.
- Nonconscious Movements: From Mystical Messages to Facilitated Communication*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.
- Facilitated Communication or Manipulated Miscommunication. Becky Greben, in *Rocky Mountain Skeptic*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (1996), pages 1 ff.
- Facilitated Communication in America. Brian J. Gorman, in *Skeptic*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1998), pages 64-71.
- The Little Professor Syndrome. Lawrence Osborne, in *The New York Times Magazine*, June 18, 2000, page 55ff. This article deals with Asperger's syndrome, a milder form of autism involving children with high intelligence who talk like adults, but lack social skills.
- Understanding Autism. Geoffrey Cowley, in *Newsweek*, July 31, 2000. □