

# Facilitated Communication Since 1995: A Review of Published Studies

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Previous reviews of Facilitated Communication (FC) studies have clearly established that proponents' claims are largely unsubstantiated and that using FC as an intervention for communicatively impaired or noncommunicative individuals is not recommended. However, while FC is less prominent than in the recent past, investigations of the technique's efficacy continue. This review examines published FC studies since the previous major reviews by Jacobson, Mulick, and Schwartz (1995) and Simpson and Myles (1995a). Findings support the conclusions of previous reviews. Furthermore, this review critiques and discounts the claims of two studies purporting to offer empirical evidence of FC efficacy using control procedures.

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**KEY WORDS:** facilitated communication; autism; literature review.

Autism, like other complex disabilities, has historically elicited considerable attention not only to aspects of etiology, characteristics, and classification, but also to effective medical, behavioral, and educational interventions (Harris, 1995; Waterhouse, Morris, Allen, Dunn, Fein, Feinstein, Rapin, & Wing, 1996). Educationally, interventions for people with autism have consistently relied on well-established and increasingly effective forms of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

However, intervention complexity related to autistic populations, particularly at more severe disability levels, creates greater weight for the attractiveness of some kind of "silver bullet" cure that may have been overlooked in decades of strenuous research and significant practical frustration among teachers and parents. Attractively intuitive interventions, almost always implemented without necessary attention to rigorous experimental control and replication, are problematic due to their persistence in the face of scientific and log-

ical challenge. Furthermore, these untested interventions may negatively compete with and possibly supplant previously validated interventions and services to children and youth with autism (Jacobson *et al.*, 1995). The most recent and prominent example of the widespread adoption of a suspect intervention in autism has been Facilitated Communication (FC), first proposed by Crossley in Australia (see Biklen, 1990; Crossley, 1992; Gorman, 1998; Green, 1992; Hudson, 1995) and brought to the United States by Biklen (e.g., 1990, 1993; Biklen & Cardinal, 1997; Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Biklen & Schubert, 1991).

## THE CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS OF FC

Biklen's contributions were not only significant in terms of bringing FC before the American public, but also because he used his explanations of FC to challenge long-held assumptions and theories of autism. Biklen acknowledged that the etiology of autism reflected a controversial range of causal hypothesis in spite of specific autistic behaviors themselves (e.g., echolalia, mutism, perseveration, social interactional problems, stereotyped activity) being more accurately defined (Biklen, 1990). Biklen further asserted that

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identifying the implications of autistic behavior, especially as related to language, was generally considered meaningless among researchers, resulting in their assumption that these children were “. . . not smart” and that, for example, stereotyped utterances and incorrect semantics traditionally “. . . were presumed to be the trademarks of incompetence” (Biklen, 1990, p. 302). Biklen countered these traditional notions after observing Crossley’s students, maintaining that: “In light of the natural language produced by Crossley’s students through typing, we are compelled to search for an alternative explanation for their mutism and unusual speech” (Biklen, 1990, p. 303). Biklen’s “. . . obvious interpretation . . . [was] that autistic children have a neurologically based problem of expression” (p. 303), and not, as generally supposed, a problem of language.

Thus, in a significant departure from most accepted aspects of language issues in autism, Biklen believed that people without communicative ability, generally regarded as lower functioning than those having some use of language for communication, could not be assumed to be lower functioning because of their obvious expressive deficits. Biklen’s argument asserted that people with autism simply had problems expressing themselves rather than a cognitive deficit, which prohibited appropriate use of language. Simply put, people with autism possessed and were able to understand and utilize language, but were unable to express it (Crossley & Remington-Gurney, 1992). Biklen claimed that a major strength of FC was that it did not assume any cognitive deficit among noncommunicative or communicatively impaired individuals (Biklen, Morton, Gold, Berrigan, & Sweminathan, 1992) and that disorders of output might not necessarily be correlated with levels of intellectual functioning (Crossley, 1992).

Biklen argued that the linguistically expressive problems of people with autism could not only be circumvented by FC, but that doing so uncovered previously unrevealed cognitive abilities. Using FC, therefore, bypassed the expression problem, allowing “natural” language (accurate, true communicative intent formulated in the client’s cognition) to emerge (Biklen, 1990). Thus, Biklen claimed that clients were able to type “natural language,” even while producing echolalic or unintelligible vocalizations (Biklen *et al.*, 1992).

Biklen further bolstered the notion of autistic individuals’ untapped intellectual potential by claiming that they were able to learn at much more sophisticated cognitive levels than had previously been thought and in spite of having never received formal education. He

claimed that these sophisticated cognitive abilities resulted from the individual’s considerable exposure to written and spoken language, although not to formal teaching (Biklen *et al.*, 1992). Indeed, Biklen extended the “unexpected literacy” aspect of his position by raising the possibility that many noncommunicative, supposedly retarded children with autism were hyperlexic, given that many characteristics of hyperlexia were also characteristics of individuals with autism (e.g., the development of extraordinary superior word recognition skills; an excellent passive vocabulary; Biklen & Schubert, 1991; Donnellan, Sabin, & Majure, 1992). Biklen claimed that if autistic individuals showed characteristics common to autism and hyperlexia, then these autistic individuals were hyperlexic and able to learn without the benefit of formal teaching. For Biklen it followed that FC was the key that could finally reveal noncommunicative individuals’ previously unknown intellectual potential.

The empirical literature related to FC and its effectiveness has received a great deal of scholarly attention resulting in numerous critical commentaries and several previous reviews. For example, there are multiple shorter commentaries on various aspects of the FC and the FC literature (e.g., Ackerson, 1994; Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Danforth, 1997; Ferguson & Horner, 1994; Goode, 1994; Green & Shane, 1994; Halle, 1994; Hitzing, 1994; Horner, 1994; Jacobson & Mulick, 1994; Levine, Shane, & Wharton, 1994; Mostert, 1994; Shane, 1994; Silliman, 1992; Williams, 1994; Wolfensberger, 1992, 1994; Zirkel, 1995). A legal review of issues related to FC can be found in Margolin, (1994), while Gorman (1999) discusses several legal decisions related to FC.

The assumptions of FC proponents, while not well formed and severely challenged (e.g., Hudson, 1995; Jacobson *et al.*, 1995; Shane, 1994), have precipitated several empirical reviews of the effectiveness of FC.

## PREVIOUS REVIEWS OF FACILITATED COMMUNICATION EFFICACY

There have been several previous reviews of FC studies (consecutively: Cummins & Prior, 1992; Green, 1992, 1994; Hudson, 1995; Jacobson *et al.*, 1995; Simpson & Myles, 1995a), as well as several critiques and commentaries (e.g., Jacobson, Eberlin, Mulick, Schwartz, Szempruch, & Wheeler, 1994; Spitz, 1997) which have accumulated evidence both for and against FC. A brief summary of these major reviews follows.