

ISAAC Position Statement on Facilitated Communication

“The International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) works to improve the lives of children and adults who use AAC...ISAAC’s mission is to promote the best possible communication for people with complex communication needs.” (<https://www.isaac-online.org/english/home/>)

Members of ISAAC have been increasingly concerned about the continued use of Facilitated Communication (FC) despite concerns about the validity of FC, that is, whether the messages constructed with facilitation originate from the person to whom they are attributed or by the facilitator. Therefore, ISAAC has established an AdHoc Committee on Facilitated Communication (henceforth “the Committee”) to review research evidence into the validity of FC.

FC (also described as “supported typing”) is a technique whereby individuals with disabilities and communication impairments (allegedly) select letters by typing on a keyboard¹ while receiving physical support, emotional encouragement, and other communication supports from facilitators. The physical support may occur at the index finger, hand, arm, elbow, or shoulder. The method involves a communication partner who may provide emotional encouragement, communication supports (e.g., monitoring to make sure the person looks at the keyboard and checks for typographical errors) and a variety of physical supports.

The main issue that is being disputed is whether the output produced when persons with disabilities are being facilitated is expressing their communicative intentions, or whether the source of the output is that of the facilitators.

To address this issue, the Committee engaged in a systematic search for research evidence in the peer-reviewed literature. The Committee then classified and analyzed this peer-reviewed research evidence along with the materials submitted by the ISAAC membership based on its informativeness to the central question of authorship. The following conclusions are based on this process:

1. Multiple reports from various stakeholders (e.g., former FC users, parents, professionals) describe that FC has had a positive impact on their lives. Given their anecdotal nature, these reports cannot be taken as irrefutable evidence for supporting a demonstration of authorship.
2. Multiple reports from various stakeholders (e.g., parents, professionals) assert negative impacts and harms of FC on their lives. Given their anecdotal nature, these reports cannot be taken as irrefutable evidence against authorship.
3. Systematic reviews of numerous controlled authorship studies provide evidence that the messages are authored by facilitators rather than persons with a

¹ Although it is acknowledged that FC also includes the pointing to pictures or objects (http://soe.syr.edu/centers_institutes/institute_communication_inclusion/what_is_supported_typing/default.aspx), the position statement is focused on typing.

- disability. There is also some evidence that the message construction by facilitators may occur without awareness of producing such a construction.
4. An analysis of three additional authorship studies, more recent than the systematic reviews, bolsters the conclusion of previous systematic reviews, in # 3, even further.
 5. Several allegations of sexual abuse have been communicated via FC, and as documented in one systematic review, the overwhelming majority of communicative messages were influenced by facilitator control. There has also been evidence by courts against the possible truth of many allegations. It is beyond the scope of this committee to outline the several secondary harms of FC, including harms to people with disability and their families arising from false allegations of sexual abuse.
 6. Recent studies providing descriptive analyses of the output generated via FC draw inferences about authorship that are inappropriate. Without prior verification of authorship through empirical means, there are many rival explanations for how messages are constructed leaving the nature of the authorship unanswered. Given the inordinate evidence for facilitator influence (see # 3), the inferences that are made in these descriptive studies are methodologically unsound and should not be used to guide practice or future research.
 7. The use of FC appears to be in violation of several articles of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (i.e., Articles 12, 16, 17, and 21) as it has been shown to prevent individuals without sufficient spoken language from using their own 'voice.' With the use of FC, the messages may be attributed to facilitators. For persons with limited or no functional speech, the use of FC risks the loss of valuable assessment and intervention efforts, time, and resources that might otherwise have been expended to implement AAC systems and strategies that are empirically validated and do not leave doubt about authorship.

In conclusion, given ISAAC's mission to promote the best possible communication abilities and opportunities for persons with limited or no functional speech, ISAAC does not support FC as a valid form of AAC, a valid means for people to access AAC, or a valid means to communicate important life decisions.

The weight of evidence does not support FC and therefore it cannot be recommended for use in clinical practice.

This position statement is consistent with the position statements of the following reputable organizations:

- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 1998)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 1993)
- American Association of Mental Retardation (AAMR, 1995)
- American Psychiatric Association Council of Representatives (APACR, 1994)
- American Psychological Association (APA, 1994)
- American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA, 1995)
- Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA, 2005)
- Association for Science in Autism Treatment

- Autism & Asperger Förbundet (2012)
- Behavior Analysis Association of Michigan (BAAM, 1998)
- New Zealand Ministries of Health and Education (2008)
- Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (2007)
- Speech Pathology Australia (2012)
- Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disabilities Inc (VALID, 2012)
- Zeitschrift fuer Heilpaedagogische Forschung (2003)