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EBP Speakers Corner

Facilitated Communication—what harm it can do: Confessions of a former facilitator

Janyce Boynton

Abstract

This article is a response to the most recent media coverage of sexual abuse allegations against parents obtained through Facilitated Communication (FC). Some parents, caregivers, educators, and researchers continue to use FC, despite overwhelming evidence within the scientific community that messages obtained through FC are facilitator-authored. In 1992, I was the facilitator in the Wheaton case and, through the guise of FC, brought sexual abuse allegations against the family of the autistic child, Betsy, with whom I worked. Authorship of the messages were challenged through scientific testing. The results of the testing concluded beyond doubt that I, not the child, authored the messages. Despite my reticence to give up my belief in FC, I could no longer ignore the scientific studies that replicated my own personal experiences with the purported technique. What follows is an overview of how I became involved with FC, how the sexual abuse allegations surfaced, and what happened when my belief in FC was challenged through scientific testing.

Keywords: *Facilitated Communication; Abuse; Scientific testing; Evidence; Unsupported treatments.*

In January 2012, I came face-to-face with my past. Not pretty. One phone call. One television broadcast, and I felt transported back in time. Repelled by current events. Compelled to speak out about past events because history—a history I played a major role in—has, tragically, repeated itself.

In 1992, I was trained in a technique called facilitated communication (FC). It was then, as it is now, touted by reputable universities as a way to help people with disabilities and communication impairments achieve “independent communication.” I passionately believed that, as a facilitator, I could help one of my students break free from her autistic, nonverbal existence. I felt that she was “in there” with a story to tell. I convinced myself that by providing physical support (holding her hand or elbow lightly as she pointed to a letter board), I could help her to slow down, reduce her impulsiveness, and get her story out. I was, I thought,

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conscientious and vigilant enough not to influence the communications. My student deserved to have her voice known, and I believed I was the one to make that happen.

These aspirations took a dark turn, however—the same dark turn that was played out on 6 January 2012 on ABC 20/20’s *From Miracle to Nightmare*, in which a girl, through FC, supposedly accused her parents and brother of alleged sexual abuse. Only the child, severely disabled by autism, was illiterate, and the facilitator, as the child’s “communication partner,” actually moved the child’s hand and authored those messages. The details of this story were shockingly, horrifyingly familiar.

Twenty years ago, I was the facilitator in the Wheaton case, a story featured on Frontline’s *Prisoners of Silence* and, later, in a 20/20 episode with Hugh Downs. Like the facilitator in the Wendrow case, I held Betsy Wheaton’s hand and typed out accusations against her family members. Graphic depictions of rape and sexual assault that had no

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bearing in reality. The family was innocent. Betsy was well cared for. No physical evidence of abuse existed. But my words, typed through the guise of FC, put in motion events that caused serious damage to a lot of people. Betsy and her brother were removed from their home to foster care, while her parents were charged. Authorities questioned the brother's role in the alleged abuse. Was he victim? Perpetrator? Both? Lawyers were hired to defend the parents and look out for the children's best interest. Vicious rumors circulated about the family in their small town, lingering even after the charges had been dropped and the children had returned to their home. All this irreparable heartache was caused by my unshakable belief in FC.

How could this have happened? How could my actions bring about so much pain and devastation? In 1992, even as the events unfolded, this notion was incomprehensible to me. How could I not know that I was moving the child's hand? This is what lawyers, parents, school administrators, researchers, and reporters asked me back then. This is what the reporter wanted to know when she called me on 6 January 2012 to get a statement about the Wendrow case. And even though I had stopped believing in and using FC 20 years ago, it is these questions, too, that stay in my mind.

In hindsight, the answer is both simple and complex: I did not want to believe FC was a hoax.

I take little solace in the fact I was not the only one. FC spread like wildfire in the early 1990s, and, incredibly, people still use FC—sometimes called supported typing—even today. By the mid-1990s, the scientific community had proved over and over again that it was the facilitator—not the disabled communication partner—who was typing the messages. Every time. Full stop. And, incredibly, parents, caregivers, educators, and even some researchers stubbornly cling

to the illusion that FC is real. FC is not a communication technique. It is a belief system—and a powerful one at that.

Some practicing facilitators are deeply devoted to their belief system. They will do anything to convince themselves that what happened to me cannot happen to them. But, I say, it can, given the right set of circumstances, hubris on the facilitator's part, a strong belief in FC, and an unwillingness to look at one's own behavior.

Here is how it happened to me.

I was introduced to FC through a trained facilitator, an educational technician (ed tech), who was working with Betsy. FC, the ed tech said, was a ground-breaking technique, which she eagerly demonstrated. The special education teacher's initial reaction? The facilitator inadvertently moved the child's arm. I was not so sure, and, despite any skepticism, both the special education teacher and I were persuaded to give FC a chance. The ed tech was a conscientious person. We had no reason to doubt her sincerity. None of us, at the time, could see any harm in trying it, so we agreed that the ed tech would use FC in her daily work with the child. I, as the speech-language clinician, would try the technique during my sessions. Then we would see how it went from there.

I read through the handouts from the facilitator's workshop, and the ed tech showed me the technique. In the beginning, I noticed my own movements. I felt that there were instances when I moved the child's arm, but I attributed it to my novice status and renewed my efforts not to influence the child's communications—as if wanting it to happen would make it so.

The ed tech and I began seeing signs that FC was "working." We got "yes" or "no" answers, obtained by supporting Betsy's arm as she pointed to a letter board, and short 3–4-word sentences. I felt, for the first time, that I was making a connection with a student who had proved one of the most

difficult on my caseload. We were convinced that these messages were coming from the child—in part because, the more practice we had as facilitators, the more fluid the “communications” became. At times, Betsy even reached for my hand when I offered it. Her seeming willingness to facilitate strengthened my belief that she wanted to participate in the activity and that FC was helping her to say what she wanted to say. When the special education teacher continued to express doubts—and an inability to use FC herself—I found myself dismissing her concerns. The ed tech worked with the child more often than anyone else, and I was focusing on FC in my language classes. To me, it made sense that the other facilitator and I would see results sooner than the special education teacher.

We followed the FC guidelines the ed tech had obtained from the workshop she attended. Though they have evolved somewhat since 1992, the guidelines for appropriate facilitation practices proposed by the Facilitated Communication Institute at Syracuse University can be found through their website even today. These guidelines recommended looking for ways to make sure we were not influencing the child as we facilitated with her. We did simple tests, like asking the child questions and watching her behavior to see whether what she expressed through FC conformed to how she was behaving in real life. We looked for spelling and syntax errors in her communications. We looked for turns of phrase that might be attributed to her own unique outlook on life. We consciously tried putting minimal pressure on the child’s arm when we worked with her. We thought we were being vigilant enough to notice if we were influencing the communications.

As messages obtained through FC became more “conversational” and seemingly more commensurate with Betsy’s peers, any

doubts we had about our own abilities and the authenticity of the communications faded. If discrepancies arose between the facilitated messages and Betsy’s actions (e.g., if she chose to eat pizza after she pointed to s-a-n-d-w-i-c-h on the letter board), we attributed it to her burgeoning decision-making skills and her right to change her mind. The ed tech became more animated by the messages coming through FC, I saw progress in my language classes, and even the special education teacher—the true skeptic in the group—showed a willingness to suspend her disbelief about FC and allowed the practice to continue in her classroom. We all felt, at least at the early stages, that the messages could be real and that Betsy was starting to show a sense of humor, tell stories, and express opinions through her work with FC. And, when these messages occurred while I was facilitating, I felt my connection with Betsy had deepened. I began to think FC was more about trust than anything else. And, I felt, Betsy was beginning to trust me—above most others—with her life’s story.

Looking back, I do not know why I thought Betsy’s written language skills could possibly outperform her spoken language abilities. It is part of the FC rhetoric, but in practice I know better. Written language is much more complex than spoken language, on so many levels. And Betsy’s spoken language skills were practically non-existent. She was, for all intents and purposes, nonspeaking, and much of what we knew about Betsy’s skills were obtained by observation only. It was difficult to assess her skills with standardized tests. At the time, I was so focused on FC that it did not occur to me to look outside the FC literature to discover what others were writing about this new phenomenon. I completely lost sight of what I was doing and put my analytical skills on the back burner. And, really, who wants to think an adult is

holding a child's hand and typing for her? It is unconscionable. As a facilitator, it was not a conclusion I came to on my own.

I was not consciously aware that practicing FC breaks an important physical boundary. In a normal classroom setting, teacher and student rarely touch. This physical barrier helps the teacher to maintain a certain formality, allowing him or her to critically, objectively assess the student's skills. Touching someone's hand for a moment to show them how to write the letter "a" is very different from what is required through FC. As Betsy's "communication partner," I sat beside her, perhaps slightly behind, and supported her arm with my hand through hours of "conversation." The purported goal for FC is to fade this support until the child can communicate independently. But, as expected at these early stages, I held her hand or elbow with at least a couple fingers at all times during the "communications." This constant touch completely dissolved the physical barrier and the formality of the teaching situation. I lost my objectivity. Subconsciously giving myself permission to cross this boundary—the one of constant physical contact—made it ever easier to override any information that disproved FC. The interactions felt real to me then. The communications felt real.

At about this time, a FC workshop was offered at the University of Maine's Center for Inclusion (now called Center for Community Inclusion and Disabilities Studies), so I signed up to go. I felt that, as "the professional," I should take an official FC workshop, since I had only received instruction from the ed tech. I did not doubt her abilities to facilitate, but the more involved I got with FC, the more the special education teacher looked to me for guidance about Betsy's language skills. We thought we would need to reassess Betsy's abilities and set new educational goals for the child. It was up to me to suggest

realistic language goals. I thought it was a good idea for me to go through the official training.

While I waited for the workshop, things started moving really quickly.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the idea of sexual abuse originated. Betsy was, in the days leading up to the reporting, exhibiting an increase in violent outbursts—hitting and scratching, mostly. Unfortunately, it was not unusual for us (special educators) to attribute abrupt or unexpected behaviors to possible abuses at home. On occasion, this was true, but in reality, these outbursts in the children we served were caused by many different factors: oncoming illness, lack of sleep, depression, disruptions at home not due to abuse, or just plain grumpy moods that all of us experience from time to time. I do not think anyone really considered the full impact of what we said. I certainly did not. We were careless in our assumptions. It was, I suppose, a way of venting frustration when disruptive, sometimes frightening outbursts occurred. I had no clue how insidious this type of thinking can be, or how much it could influence my behavior, whether I was conscious of it or not.

I had never before been hit by Betsy—or by any student, for that matter. She was quick and powerful. She hit me hard in the face. Looking back, I understand that these punches and, later, scratches were the clearest communications I had ever received from her. I do not know what her thoughts were, exactly, but at the very least, she signaled me—in nonverbal, brutally clear ways—to stop. Stop touching her hand. Stop sitting so close. I do not know. Just stop. Instead of listening to her, I persisted with the facilitation. I still carry a scar on my wrist where she dug in hard. And, before I go any further, I want to apologize, again, for not listening to her.

The physical blows from someone I thought trusted me somehow allowed me

to make an erroneous psychological leap: that she was abused. I convinced myself that Betsy was acting out. Shortly afterward, messages started appearing on the page to “confirm” this belief. I was horrified. With these words, I felt that my deepest fears for the child were realized.

So, what would a reasonable person do in this situation?

A reasonable person would have scientifically, objectively tested FC when the messages were benign. Because, in the terms of the critics of FC, “I love sunflowers” carries the same weight as “My father touched my privates.” Both are facilitator-authored. Both are equally fake.

But, believe me, in real-life terms these two messages are miles apart. And I had lost my ability to be reasonable in this situation.

The normal protocol for reporting suspicions of sexual or physical abuse was to bring the information to the school guidance counselor. The initial messages we were getting through FC were not that graphic, but they were enough to set off red flags: swear words, disparaging remarks about life at home. We talked about it, the special education teacher and I, and decided not to report right away. Betsy was a teenager. This might be, we thought, the first time in her life she could truly express her anger. Again, doubts surfaced about the authenticity of FC, but we felt that we could not entirely discount the messages. I suppose it was easier to believe in the messages than in the fact that we, the facilitators, were moving the child’s hand. We decided to be patient and see what happened next.

Only in looking back do I understand how much pressure was building inside me. I had already convinced myself that this child might be abused at home. Waiting patiently to see what happened next only added to that internal anxiety. I think subconsciously I felt that we were not taking the allegations of abuse seriously enough. If this were a

non-disabled speaking child, we would already at least have talked with the guidance counselor. Weren’t we doing a disservice to Betsy by not moving forward?

I think it is not a coincidence that the child’s “confidences” through FC increased both in frequency and in detail, backed up by more hitting and scratching. I felt that there was an urgency in these messages. I was convinced the child was telling us that she was not safe. The level-headed special education teacher’s cautious wait-and-see approach seemed to be a breaking point for me. How could anyone stand by and watch this child be hurt? Remember, this was all in my imagination. There was no evidence of abuse. Except for the increased hitting and scratching—which could, in hindsight, be attributed to the facilitators’ persistent close physical proximity to the child—Betsy’s outward appearance and demeanor throughout this whole ordeal remained consistent. Other than the messages obtained through FC, there was no other reason to believe that she was being abused. At the time, though, I felt that something had to be done. Now.

So, the special education teacher took the FC journal pages to the guidance counselor. They must have talked about the ramifications of the situation. Which do they believe: the facilitated messages (and err on the side of caution and avoid questioning the actions of one of their own), or that I was the one moving the child’s hand (and, then have to accuse me of it)? The phone call was made.

A lot happened over the next few days. There was a Department of Human Services (DHS) investigation and interview at the school. We, the child and I, plus the DHS interviewer and police officer, sat in a room—the same room we had often used for speech-language lessons and that would later be used in the blind testing. I had never actually witnessed an interview like this, so I was nervous going in. I knew this was serious. I knew I was using an unfamiliar

technique with the child. I knew there would be a lot of eyes on me as the facilitator. It was, I thought, up to me to protect the child from undue scrutiny and criticism. I convinced myself that, since Betsy had confided in me through FC, I was the only one in the room whom she trusted.

The first part of the interview was spent by the DHS worker and police officer assessing the situation. They were suspicious, and rightfully so. And here, for me, is one of the most painful parts of recalling this experience. I realize now, in looking back, how much my behavior could influence other people's perception of FC (particularly those unfamiliar with FC and with people like Betsy, who exhibit severe disabilities). If nothing else, facilitators are sincere in their belief in FC. This must have come across to the police officer. I essentially helped the police officer override his doubts about FC, at least for the duration of the interview, and I remember the exact moment it happened.

The officer watched from a distance while the DHS worker asked some preliminary questions. I could see the tension in his face. We were all tense. The anxiety in the room was palpable. For some reason, he stepped closer to the child and me. Leaning closer, he started to ask her a question. "Hi," he said to Betsy. "H-I" came the FC response. He looked at me, I nodded, and immediately he broke out in a big grin. I do not know if I subconsciously knew that he was the toughest person in the room to convince, but that grin changed the course of events completely. It was in that moment that his demeanor changed. He relaxed slightly, and it seemed to me he became enough of a believer to allow the questioning to continue.

The questions DHS workers and police ask in these interviews are not supposed to lead the child to any particular answers. But as the adult responding through FC, I knew what kind of information they expected to hear when they asked questions like "Did

anyone touch you?" or "Where were you touched?" or "Where did this take place?" or "Was anyone else in the house?" And, when the words were out and on the page, I was horrified at what I saw there. It is a vicious, largely subconscious, circle. Think the words. Type the words. See the words. Believe the words. Think the words. Type the words. See the words. Believe the words. And things spiral out of control. Despite the outrageousness of the responses, everyone in the room seemed to take them seriously, including and especially me. There was no turning back. The child was immediately removed from her home.

It is crazy to think of it now, but people turned to me as the expert on the child. It is, I suppose, what I had set myself up to be, but I was not prepared for taking care of her in any meaningful way. I realized consciously just how little I knew of the child. The DHS worker called to ask whether I could be with the child at the offices while they looked for foster care. Because of the severity of Betsy's disability, they were having trouble finding someone to take her on such short notice. I made some telephone calls and found someone I knew and trusted to take her in. At the DHS office I learned that the brother had also been removed from his home. I believe at one point the parents were even in the same building as I was with their daughter. My stomach was in my throat the whole time.

At around this time, I met Betsy's guardian *ad litem*. He was respectful of both the child and me, and I felt quite early on that I could trust him. He watched me with the child, asked her questions, and she, legitimately, seemed to respond to his gentle manner. He spent time talking with me on the phone and in person, asking about FC, the child, me, and what I thought had happened. In all the chaos of those days, I felt he was someone who, at the very least, gave me the benefit of the doubt. It

was a relief after the scrutiny of the previous days.

While I waited for what I thought was the trial, the date arrived for the FC workshop at the university. I decided to go but not reveal to anyone who I was.

Workshop leaders spent the first part of the day reading testimonials—poetry and other statements allegedly written by people through FC. The messages were sentimental, largely focusing on the release people felt from their imprisoned bodies and how FC set them free. These testimonials, passed off by the expert facilitators as proof that FC works, were intended to squelch the protestations of non-believers. They disparaged scientific studies, stating that this type of testing was adversarial and an insult to both the facilitator's and the child's intelligence. Testing, they told us, put undue stress on the child's ability to perform. Had not those in the autism community already suffered enough? Outsiders just did not understand the true nature of autism the way FC people did. All this pulled on my heartstrings.

Workshop leaders also touched upon a controversy gathering momentum in the news: sexual allegation cases through FC. They addressed this by saying that facilitators should expect admissions such as these from FC users. Their reasoning? Children, previously locked in broken bodies, were, for the first time, able to tell their own stories, so, naturally, they were confiding to their communication partners about all aspects of their lives, including abuse and neglect. Facilitators were, according to the workshop leaders, to take these admissions very seriously.

The leaders suggested using a "naive" facilitator to confirm abuse allegations. This second facilitator would stand in for the first facilitator to make sure the messages were real (even though partnering the FC user with a stranger causes stress for the child and, therefore, makes communications

through FC difficult). If the child's messages are real, they reasoned, both facilitators would get the same responses. If the "naive" facilitator did not get the same messages as the original facilitator, then, most likely, the allegations were not true. (Though having the child repeat upsetting information would also cause undue stress and could reduce the efficacy of the responses, so it might not be clear whether the information was true or not.) Any discrepancy in performance was generally blamed on the first facilitator—the "bad" facilitator—moving the child's hand. The expert facilitators, the workshop leaders, made it clear how they felt about "bad" facilitators. These people were irresponsible and should not be using FC.

At the break, I went outside to get some fresh air. I felt sick to my stomach. Could I be one of the "bad" facilitators? Could I have, inadvertently, been moving the child's hand? Though these questions weighed heavily, I could not see how it was possible that I had authored those messages. Instead, I started shifting blame. If I did move her hand—and that was a big "if"—maybe I had been taught wrong. Maybe the ed tech was the bad facilitator. Maybe all I needed was to correct my technique. Feeling slightly better at this thought, I returned to the workshop for the afternoon session.

We were shown how to facilitate. The workshop leaders gave facilitators two primary instructions: do not move the other person's hand, and make sure that they are looking at the keyboard. They also gave out, I saw with some relief, the same FC guidelines I used at school. Perhaps I was on the right track after all. We broke up into small groups and practiced "good" facilitation. We were paired with another workshop participant, and an expert facilitator watched our technique. And... I passed.

Essentially, I came away from the workshop more confident in my technique than

when I had gone in. Hard to admit, but true. I went from “I’ll see if I’m doing this right” to “I’m possibly moving the child’s hand” to “See, I am a good person. I’m doing this exactly right” all in one official day of FC training.

What I did not come away from the workshop with was a feeling that I could, in any way, confide in the FC leadership. Whatever I felt about FC as a whole, I felt certain that this group of believers would not back me up. More than anything, I feared rejection. I did not want to be one of the “bad” ones. I felt I had nowhere else to go but deeper into FC.

My reticence to confide in the FC community turned out to be a good thing. Painful, but good. It led me out of the trap I was in.

After the workshop, the school went silent on the issue, so I was pretty much alone in figuring this thing out. I relied more and more on the guardian *ad litem’s* opinions and advice. Though his job was, as I saw it, to look out for Betsy’s best interest, he continued to listen to my struggles with FC. He encouraged me to agree to some testing.

I was not thrilled about this option. More than ever, I was aware of the divide between FC practitioners and the scientific community. I was already defensive, but, after the workshop, I especially believed these “skeptics” were not my allies. I expected the testing situation to put undue pressure on Betsy, and I was not happy about it. I thought the results would be biased and that, by even agreeing to the testing, I was setting the child—and me—up for failure.

I did a lot of soul-searching in the days leading up to the testing. I still believed FC was real. I did not like the idea of going against the FC experts. But I also felt, thanks to the guardian *ad litem’s* appeals to my more rational side, that testing was the most humane way to proceed. People’s lives were on the line. And, deep down, really deep down, I had to know for myself

whether the communications were independent or whether I was authoring those messages myself. I took a gamble that FC would stand up to the test.

The guardian *ad litem’s* reassurances kept me from backing out. He had been working with the evaluator, and I trusted him when he said that the testing situation would be as relaxed for the child as possible. I did not want her to freeze up and stop communicating. The evaluation room was familiar: the same room in which her language lessons were held and the one we also used for the DHS interview. He would also be there to make sure the situation did not get adversarial.

On the day of the testing, the evaluator and the guardian *ad litem* sat directly in front of us. I do not remember who else was there. Several people, I think, but they were in back or to the side of us, so I was sure Betsy was not affected by their presence. The evaluator was soft-spoken and gentle in his approach to the child and respectful of me, so despite my nervousness I thought that, at the very least, this would go okay. I kept looking for signs that Betsy was distressed, but even back then I had no reason to believe that her behavior was changed in any way. She approached this situation the same as she did any other situation.

One of the first things the evaluator told the child was that she could leave the testing situation any time she wanted. Then he introduced the activities. I do not remember the exact order, but I do remember the tests.

One was a picture identification test—something I know the child had done in her language activities. I had no doubt she could perform this task successfully. I was shown a picture; then she, without me seeing it, was also shown a picture. I had imagined “scientific testing” to be much more complicated, but these were all common, easily identifiable objects: a shoe, ball, banana, and the like. She was then asked to label the

object through FC. I was relieved when she started responding. This was an indication to me she was not too nervous to do the activity.

Under these conditions, I realized that whenever I saw a picture, the image stuck in my mind. I guessed that the child's picture and my picture might not always be the same. I felt myself either struggling to block the images from my mind or trying to guess what she might be seeing. These were my first conscious realizations that I was, indeed, influencing the communications. Despite my best efforts to clear my thoughts, I would later learn that every object identified through FC was based on the visual input of images I had seen. Not one answer was based on pictures shown to the child.

In a second test, I was asked questions about the child's life that only she would know. I kept waiting for the testing to turn adversarial. That is what the FC leaders had warned us about in the workshop. But, this far into the testing, I just was not seeing it. The evaluator was not asking Betsy difficult questions. He asked about people she knew and places she liked to go, her pet's name, the color of the family car, and the like. Surely, this was not as stressful as a DHS interview, where her family members were accused of sexual misconduct. I was the one becoming uncomfortable now. With this much focus on my own behavior, again I felt myself struggling for answers to questions I did not know. The child willingly pointed to the board to type out answers. I tried to be cognizant of the pressure I was placing on her arm and whether or not she was looking at the board, and clear my brain of images so she could answer the questions. None of the facilitated answers were correct. Only my guesses appeared on the page.

In the final task, the evaluator took the child into the hallway and showed her an object. I later learned that he had the child hold the object and even told her what it

was. Returning to the room, he asked the child what she had seen in the hallway. By this time, I was painfully aware of how I might have been influencing the facilitation. (It takes a while for the truth to sink in.) Despite my confusion, I was determined to prove that FC was true. I concentrated on keeping my touch light. I felt in my heart that she could answer the question. But, because I did not know the answer and was concentrating on keeping my mind clear, she made no response. Ironically, that was the only true response the whole day. Then, the evaluator pulled an object from his pocket, showed it to her and to me, and asked the child what it was. I named the letters as Betsy, with me holding her arm, pointed to the letter board. K-E-Y. The same object, I later found out, that the evaluator had shown her in the hallway.

This is when Betsy pulled away from me and left the room. She was done. I remember trying to convince people to bring her back in, but it was over. Everyone in the room, including the guardian *ad litem*, whom I trusted, knew the truth: FC was fake, and I was not the child's facilitator. I was the one moving her arm.

I felt such devastation, panic, pain, loneliness—a myriad of emotions difficult to put into words. The whole FC thing unraveled for me that day, and I did not have an explanation for any of it. Almost immediately, I started rationalizing away the truth. Though it was not true, I went away from the testing telling myself that the situation had been hostile, the evaluator had been hostile, everyone had turned against me. Incredibly, I even tried facilitating with the child in the week or two after the testing, resulting in more outrageous and false allegations. The parents, understandably, asked that I no longer work with the child. I felt tremendous loss.

I remember feeling extremely vulnerable and raw then. Betrayed by FC somehow. The

people who had been involved with FC at school distanced themselves—a kind of psychological protective measure on their part, I suppose. The guidance counselor and special education teacher never referred to the incident once the test results came back. The other facilitator was furious. She felt that if she had been in the chair instead of me, the results would have been different. I just shook my head. “You mean all this time, I’ve been talking to myself?” she asked me. It was not a possibility she was willing to face. I, more than anyone else, understood her struggle. She never really spoke to me again.

The guardian *ad litem* gave me some scientific studies to consider—studies I would have dismissed earlier as anti-FC propaganda. But, these studies replicated what I had experienced personally in the test situation. The truth about FC resonated with me. It was—and always had been—a fake.

I voluntarily went to the administrators of my school and urged them to stop the use of FC. They respected my wishes and put a district-wide ban in place. But even in light of this situation they were not ready to say definitively that FC did not work. They left open the possibility that, if FC could be proven by the scientific community, they would revisit the issue.

It is here where I think the borderline skeptics among us do a great disservice to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Professionals and lay people alike leave open the possibility that FC might work... with some people... someday. It is human nature. No one wants people to suffer or be unable to communicate effectively on their own. No one wants to believe that it is the facilitator who is the one doing the typing. But if I were a school administrator, educator, parent, caregiver, guidance counselor, lawyer, DHS worker, police officer, or judge, knowing what I know today

about FC, I would not allow a single word to be typed on a keyboard on behalf of a child without first testing the facilitator in a controlled environment away from the supportive gaze of other believers. Every facilitator believes that he or she is one of the “good” ones. Every facilitator moves their communication partner’s arm and authors the FC messages.

I understand how difficult it may be for some facilitators to change their belief system. There is a lot at stake: people’s careers, reputations, connections with their family member or client. Nonetheless, I urge practicing facilitators to take a long, hard look at their own behavior. Voice doubts. Pursue testing outside the FC community. Question motivations. And, for those facilitators who have already undergone scientific testing, find a way to put aside the hurt and shame and speak out about your experience. We cannot erase the damage we have caused by our actions, but we can take responsibility for our part in perpetuating the myth of FC. It is time to put a stop to this practice that adversely affects the very people we set out to protect.

History has shown that people who know better think “what is the harm in trying FC?” But now we know what harm FC can do. Deep down, we have known this for 20 years. We now have to find the courage and integrity to believe it.

Declaration of interest: I decided to write this article because I have experienced FC in a way that few critics or proponents have: first as a believer and defiant defender of FC, then as a demoralized ex-facilitator, and now, 20 years later, as a skeptic solid in my belief that FC is more about the facilitator’s desire to connect with their disabled family member or client than it is about the disabled person’s ability to communicate through FC. Although I was an educator at the time these events occurred, I am no longer employed

in any school system. I left education nearly 15 years ago. I am not affiliated with any groups (pro or con) associated with FC, and I have not had contact with the Wheaton family since the taping of the 20/20 show. I decided to write this article of my own volition because nothing I have currently read or seen in the media has dissuaded me from believing that

FC is not a valid form of independent communication. I cannot change the events of the past, but I can continue to speak out about and take responsibility for my part in bringing about the events of 1992. My hope is that this brings some small comfort to the Wheatons and to the others so adversely affected by the use of FC.