

ASID Position Statement on

Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method

This ASID position statement is about the related techniques: **Facilitated Communication** (Biklen et al., 1992) and **Rapid Prompting Method** (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). Facilitated Communication is also called 'Supported Typing' and other names. Rapid Prompting Method is also called 'Spelling to Communicate' and other names such as 'Informative Pointing'. We use the term 'Rapid Prompting Method' to refer to Rapid Prompting Method, Spelling to Communicate, Informative Pointing, and other terms used to refer to Rapid Prompting Method.

It is often claimed that Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method help people who have little or no speech to communicate. There is no scientific, rigorous evidence to support these claims. In this position statement, we are concerned about using these techniques with people with intellectual disabilities who have little or no speech.

ASID recognises the importance of communication rights being accessible to all people, including those with little or no speech. All people have the same communication rights. ASID recognises that there are many methods of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) that can enable communication.

It is the position of ASID that:

1. Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method should not be used with people with intellectual disabilities. The use of these techniques raises ethical problems in relation to informed consent, autonomy, and increased risk of harm.
2. Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method should not be used in the process of Supported Decision-Making or Shared Decision-Making. The use of facilitator-dependent techniques can misrepresent the person's views. This can have serious consequences and restrict access to their human rights.
3. Messages produced using Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method should not be viewed as being produced by the person with intellectual disability.

4. People exposed to Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method have the right to an independent assessment to determine authorship of messages produced using these techniques.
5. People with intellectual disabilities, who have little or no speech, should have access to a full feature-matching AAC assessment. A feature-matching assessment includes a full assessment of their capabilities and communication needs. They have a right to autonomy, and should have access to a range of communication aids and strategies that support independent communication and reflect their views (McMahon et al., 2024). They have a right to an independent form of communication and to communication partners recognising **all** forms of their communication, including any body language, facial expression, vocalisations, and behaviour as well as any speech or use of AAC. Systematic reviews and expert summaries of evidence-based support outline several ways to support people with little or no speech to communicate. These include development of speech and/or language, the use of AAC, and interpreting the person's behaviour as communicative.

Background

Terms and Definitions

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Refers to all types of communication that add to or replace speech. AAC includes both AAC systems (e.g., communication boards, speech devices, apps on an iPad for communication) and strategies (e.g., communication partner behaviours, interpreting behaviour as communication).

Authorship. Authorship refers to 'who is the author' of a message produced using AAC, technology and communication assistance. Determining authorship involves checking if the person with intellectual disability is the one who is producing the message.

Feature-Matching Assessment for AAC. The goal of a feature-matching assessment is to identify an individual's strengths and needs and match these to features of varied AAC systems and strategies.

Generative AI. Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence. It refers to advanced computer programs and software that enables machines to do things that usually require a human level of intelligence. Generative AI enables the rapid production of text, pictures, and other products that could be used in communication technologies. This statement briefly mentions generative AI technology, due to the importance of how this might intersect with AAC interventions (e.g., the use of speech generative devices, brain-computer interfaces) and the attribution of ‘written’ or ‘spoken’ messages to persons with severe or profound intellectual disabilities who have little or no speech.

Participation Model of AAC. This involves identifying not only the individual’s physical, speech, language, and cognitive capabilities but also access barriers and opportunities and aspects of the environment which are important to supporting the person’s communication needs and increasing their access and participation using AAC.

Person-first Language. ASID documents use person-first language. This makes the important point that a person has many characteristics and should not be defined by their disability.

People with Intellectual Disabilities with Little or No Speech. This is a diverse group who may communicate using a combination of multimodal communication methods (Beukelman & Light, 2020). These methods include vocalisations, gestures, signs, speech (e.g., spontaneous generative language; echolalia), augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) (e.g., communication boards, speech generating devices, mobile devices with apps), symbolic communication (e.g., pictures, line drawings, photos, letters, gestures, signs, speech), non-symbolic communication (e.g., behaviours and physical states, body language, facial expression) and communication inferred from interpreting behaviour and other forms of non-verbal communication as meaningful. All these methods of communication may be used in isolation or in combination and may involve the assistance of a third party supporting the person’s autonomous communication and interpreting their communication (Beukelman & Light, 2020).

Techniques. In this statement, Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method are referred to as ‘techniques’ rather than ‘support’. This is due to the lack of evidence of a treatment effect and consequently a lack of confidence that these techniques support communication in the individual with disability.

About Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method

Facilitated Communication (Biklen et al., 1992) (also called ‘supported typing’) and Rapid Prompting Method (Mukhopadhyay, 2008) (also called Rapid Prompting, Spelling to Communicate, or Informative Pointing) are claimed to provide a form of AAC for people with intellectual disabilities who have little or no speech. This claim is not supported by evidence. Systematic reviews of Facilitated Communication (Hemsley et al., 2018; Schlosser et al., 2014) have synthesised decades of research demonstrating facilitator influence over messages produced using the technique. A systematic review of Rapid Prompting Method (Schlosser et al., 2019) revealed no evidence that it is an effective form of communication. Since that review, published studies on Rapid Prompting Method (e.g., (Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019; Jaswal, 2024) provide no evidence that data collected from participants were authored by the person with disability and not the facilitator (Vyse et al., 2019).

What does Facilitated Communication involve? It involves a person with intellectual disability who has little or no speech, a speaking person in the role of a ‘facilitator’ and an alphabet or letter board, or a speech device with an alphabet display. The **alphabet board or speech device** with the alphabet is on a stable surface, or the facilitator might hold it in the air. The **facilitator** holds or touches the person with intellectual disability while that person points to letters. The hold or touch on the person might be visible (e.g., the hand, wrist, elbow, arm, shoulder, or back) or might be out of sight (e.g., lower back, leg). The facilitator is consistently looking at the alphabet board or speech device during their facilitation. As well as touch, the facilitator often provides verbal cues, prompts, and redirects the person’s attention during message production. The **person with intellectual disability** uses one finger in the typing and might not be looking at or attending to the alphabet board or the facilitator.

What does Rapid Prompting Method involve? It involves a person with intellectual disability who has little or no speech, a speaking person in the role of a ‘facilitator’, and an alphabet or letter board, or a speech device with an alphabet display. The **facilitator holds** an alphabet board, stencil of letters, or speech generating device in the air, or on a table. The facilitator is consistently looking at the alphabet board/stencil while holding it. The facilitator controls small or large movements of the **alphabet board** before a letter is selected. The facilitator often provides verbal, touch, or other cues during message production. The facilitator might redirect the person’s attention multiple times. **The person with intellectual disability** uses a finger, a stick, a pen, or other item to point. They might or might not be looking at the alphabet board or the facilitator.

Prompt dependency rather than independent communication. Both Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method rely on the person being given prompts. The techniques promote prompt dependency, where the person is taught to respond to prompts and cues in letter selection. A facilitator prompts the person’s message using a range of cues. The person with intellectual disability learns to respond to increasingly subtle cues over time. The prompt dependency in Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method is a problem for two reasons. First, it occurs in the context of the ideomotor effect. This means, the facilitator is unable to control their own influence over the message due to the subconscious effect where *thoughts subconsciously influence movements* (Burgess et al., 1998). Second, it leaves open the possibility that the facilitator can *intentionally* control the message through controlling the person’s movements or the movement of the alphabet board.

Silencing of Critics

Over several decades, no studies have demonstrated that either Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method provide a way for people with intellectual disabilities and little or no speech to communicate. Despite this, both techniques are promoted as being legitimate forms of AAC by some people. Despite the lack of evidence of effectiveness, and cautions against use, the techniques are rising in popularity. This is most likely due to exposure of parents and clinicians to mass distribution of misinformation (Trembath et al.,

2015) in mainstream media (Lilienfeld et al., 2014) and social media, particularly YouTube (Hemsley & Dann, 2014). As well, criticism of these techniques is often discouraged. Some parents of people with little or no speech have written about the harms of these techniques for their children, feeling silenced or bullied in their communities if they voice their concerns about these techniques (Lutz, 2023; Wombles, 2014).

Determining Authorship in Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting

When two people are involved in letter selection from a board or speech device, either by touching/holding the person or holding the aid in the air, it is important to determine who is the author of the message, and any influence of the facilitator over the letters selected (Schlosser & Prabhu, 2024).

To date, there is no evidence that messages produced using Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method are authored by the person with intellectual disability. There is also no evidence that the use of these techniques results in independent communication.

Findings of authorship studies (Hemsley et al., 2018; Schlosser et al., 2014) and legal cases (Gorman, 1999) consistently show that messages produced using Facilitated Communication reflect the voice of the facilitator and not the person with intellectual disability. Attempting to remove facilitator influence, by any training or practice of the facilitator, is ineffective due to the 'ideomotor effect' resulting in subconscious influence over the letters selected (Burgess et al., 1998).

There are no published studies outlining the outcomes of authorship testing in the use of Rapid Prompting Method. Message-passing tests outlined by proponents are not a reliable indicator of authorship using Rapid Prompting Method (Beals, 2024). No research has yet shown that messages produced using Rapid Prompting Method reflect the voices of people with intellectual disabilities or people on the autism spectrum with little or no speech which would be necessary for it to be deemed a valid form of AAC.

Qualitative studies that include people who use Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method have not described how authorship of the messages used in the data was assured as being the voice of the person rather than the facilitator (e.g., Jaswal & Akhtar,

2019). Such studies do not describe ruling out facilitator influence over the messages used in the interviews before messages are attributed to the person. These studies lack rigour for failing to control for facilitator influence, or rule out facilitator authorship, during data collection (Vyse et al., 2019).

Comparing Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting

While Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method may be visibly different, they both involve a facilitator and an alphabet board in some form. They are comparable in many ways with similar features. Thus, concerns about who is authoring the message obtained using Facilitated Communication also extend to messages obtained using Rapid Prompting Method (Todd, 2015; Tostanoski et al., 2014). The two techniques are similarly problematic (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2018a, 2018b; Todd, 2015; Tostanoski et al., 2014), as both:

- lack a firm theoretical foundation
- rely on prompt dependency, and facilitator-dependency
- lack evidence of effectiveness in reflecting the person's voice
- risk violation of the person's communication rights
- introduce power and control over messages (Schlosser & Prabhu, 2024)
- do not control for the ideomotor effect (subconscious influence of thoughts over motor movements)
- rely on a presumption of competence even where this is not demonstrated

Warnings by Other Organisations Against the Use of Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting

There is widespread recognition from consumer and professional organisations that Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method are not valid and reliable forms of AAC and pose a risk to the person's communication rights, agency, autonomy, and safety. This is due to the serious risk of Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method replacing the person's voice with the facilitator's voice. Multiple organisations warn against the use of these techniques, noting that

- both are similar and rely on prompt dependence
- there are significant risks to the person with intellectual disability's communication rights due to facilitator influence over the messages produced
- there are risks of harm associated with Facilitated Communication (e.g., sexual maltreatment, false allegations of sexual abuse)
- there is a risk of harms associated with lost opportunities for the person's development and using money that could otherwise be spent on effective interventions and approaches. Parents and teachers spending time on ineffective techniques may reduce the time and money available for communication interventions supporting independence that are known to be effective.

Protecting Communication Rights

All people with intellectual disabilities communicate.

People with intellectual disabilities who have little or no speech may communicate using a combination of methods (Beukelman & Light, 2020). These include vocalisations and AAC, such as: communication boards, speech generating devices and mobile devices with apps; symbolic communication such as pictures, line drawings, photos, letters, gestures and signs; non-symbolic communication such as behaviours, body language and facial expression; and communication inferred from interpreting behaviour and other forms of non-verbal communication as being meaningful. All these methods of communication may be used in isolation or in combination and may involve the assistance of a third party supporting the person's autonomous communication and interpreting their communication (Beukelman & Light, 2020).

All people with intellectual disabilities have the same communication rights as all people.

People who have little or no speech have the same communication rights as any other person, with a right to their own communication being respected, including their speech, AAC, behaviour, or other forms of communication. Communication rights are outlined in the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and include the right to freedom of expression.

All people with intellectual disabilities have the right to a full, feature-matching AAC assessment from a qualified speech pathologist and multidisciplinary team

A feature-matching AAC assessment refers to a process of assessment that seeks to find out all the person's capabilities, impairments, and limitations. The goal of a feature-matching assessment is to identify the individual's strengths and communication access needs and match these to AAC features and strategies. It involves *matching* the person's capabilities, impairments, and needs with features of AAC systems that meet those access and communication needs. The feature-matching assessment may occur as part of an assessment using the Participation Model of AAC. This model identifies the individual's physical, speech, language, and cognitive capabilities and any **access barriers** and **opportunities and aspects of the environment** to support the person's communication needs (Beukelman & Light, 2020). There are many aspects of the environment that can be modified to support the person's individual communication needs. These include communicating in a quiet room or a noisy room; lighting being modified; location being inside or outside; one-to-one or in a group; and the provision of tools and equipment (e.g., assistive technology, mounting systems, switch access).

All people with intellectual disabilities have a right to evidence-based interventions that are effective in supporting autonomy in communication.

The feature-matching assessment and trials of AAC identifies which communication interventions are needed to uphold the person's independent access to communication and communication rights. People who use little or no speech have a right to full access to AAC and any necessary communication aids and strategies that are effective and reflect their own views and preferences.

There are many ways to access communication aids.

There are many methods of accessing a communication aid that (a) support independent access; (b) do not require a third party to hold or touch the person with disability or the communication aid during message production; and (c) involve responding to a person's signals (that may or may not be intentional) to engage them in a process of communication.

There are many resources to support people with severe or profound intellectual disabilities who have little or no speech. These include Key Word Sign, gesture, personal communication dictionaries, choice books, and communication diaries/calendars.

Supporters, clinicians, and educators should follow evidence-based practice in AAC.

Evidence-based practice takes account of the research evidence, client views and preferences, and clinical expertise. Supporters, clinicians, and educators supporting communication or selecting communication interventions should be guided by the strength of the evidence and confidence in the research findings. They should also be guided by the views and preferences of the person with disability and expert consensus statements or clinical guidelines on providing intervention services and training (Trembath et al., 2022).

Co-production or co-construction of communication occurs in a variety of assistive communication strategies.

Although this position statement is about Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method, these are not the only techniques which involve a third party in the use of an AAC method or strategy with a person who has little or no speech (Johnson et al., 2012). ASID recommends ensuring the integrity of any form of AAC as reflecting the person's own voice. This requires the role of the assistant who is supporting communication to be observed, acknowledged, and documented.

- Examples of communication methods that involve an assistant in the co-production of messages are speech interpretation, eye-pointing interpretation, pre-selection of items for choice-making, providing prompts or cues to locate items on a communication board or in a communication book (e.g., turning to a page in a book, moving symbols or pictures to a location on a mat), encoding of messages (e.g., interpreting a choice of colours or numbers to refer to groups of words or levels of messages in a communication aid), and interpreting non-intentional or informal communication.
- Many communication methods are theoretically sound and have a stronger evidence base (Ganz et al., 2024; Holyfield et al., 2017; Iacono et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2017,

2022; Lorah et al., 2024; Lorah et al., 2022; Sievers et al., 2018; Syriopoulou-Delli & Eleni, 2022). Others have an emergent evidence-base or lack a strong research evidence base (Mirenda, 2014).

In keeping with this position statement, the role of the assistant co-producing a message using any form of AAC should be **checked**. Any influence of an assistant over a message produced using any form of AAC should be **acknowledged** and **documented**. Unless **independence** can be **objectively and reliably established**, messages generated through co-production should not be relied upon as reflecting the person's wants, needs, views, experiences, or preferences.

Protecting the person with intellectual disability against the conscious or subconscious influence of an assistant over the message co-produced using AAC is important. Protections against assistant influences on messages may include the person with disability:

- a) Having **access to more than one method of communication** (including at least one form of **independent** communication to verify messages),
- b) receiving assistance in communication from **a variety of communication partners**, and
- c) **not** being **reliant upon prompts and cues** to produce a message.

Checking on the independence and authorship of messages produced using AAC should be the priority of any AAC clinician, supporter, or service provider. It is important to identify and acknowledge any influence of the assistant over the message and take appropriate actions to provide access to independent communication.

Co-production with Generative AI advancements is a potential risk to communication rights.

There is currently a rapid expansion in the use of Generative AI, such as ChatGPT or other Large Language Models) being built into other communication technologies, such as Internet Search Engines, word processing technologies, and AAC systems (Valencia et al., 2023). It is important to monitor how these technologies are used within AAC systems and in technologies to assist people with intellectual disabilities or who are on the autism spectrum

(Iannone & Giansanti, 2024). Technological advancements that involve co-production with an artificial intelligence technology (e.g., using large language models, machine learning) should continue to ensure the protection of the person with disability's full communication rights and autonomy in communication. Technologies yet to be released should be monitored and evaluated for risks and benefits to communication rights, prior to adoption and use for communication by people on the autism spectrum or with severe or profound intellectual disability. The person with disability should be able to check, understand, and accept or reject any text, speech, or graphic output of a Generative AI technology, and the role of the AI in formulating messages delivered using technology should be transparent and acknowledged.

Resources

Communication Resources

- Speech Pathology Australia public resource <https://communicationhub.com.au/>
- Autism CRC <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/> and Best Practice Portal <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/best-practice/home>

Position Statements on Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting

A website collating materials and listing organisations with a position against the use of

Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method

<https://www.facilitatedcommunication.org/>

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) 2018

- American Speech-Language Hearing Association Position Statement on Facilitated Communication <https://www.asha.org/policy/ps2018-00352/>
- American Speech-Language Hearing Association on Rapid Prompting Method <https://www.asha.org/policy/ps2018-00351/>

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), 1993, 2008

- https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Policy_Statements/2008/Facilitated_Communication.aspx

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) 2019

- <https://www.aaid.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/facilitated-communication-and-rapid-prompting-method?fbclid=IwAR2futUBpErm5OmeQfy6o393qRDGXq7OB0ayOTmWYLEqwLfiRf3p0kjcVYw>

American Psychological Association (APA) 1994

- <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/chapter-11>

Association for Science in Autism Treatment (n.d.)

- <https://asatonline.org/for-parents/learn-more-about-specific-treatments/facilitated-communication/>

Canadian Pediatric Society 2019

- <https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/asd-post-diagnostic-management>

University of Pretoria, Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication, n.d.

- <https://www.up.ac.za/centre-for-augmentative-alternative-communication/article/2849691/position-statement-on-expressive-methods-of-communication-for-persons-with-limited-speech-that-require-the-input-of-a-trained-supporter>

Information Autism, 2022

- <https://www.informationautism.org/interventions/16/facilitated-communication-and-autism>

International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC), 2014

- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/07434618.2014.971492>

National Autism Society (UK)

- https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/understanding-and-developing-communication#H2_5

National Council on Severe Autism

- <https://www.ncsautism.org/position-statement-fc>

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