

ASID position statement on Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method

Plain language version

This statement is about two methods used with people who have intellectual disabilities and little or no speech:

- Facilitated Communication (also known as Supported Typing) and
- the Rapid Prompting Method (also called Spelling to Communicate or Informative Pointing).

Some people say these methods help people who struggle with speech to communicate. However, there is no scientific evidence that these methods work. We are worried about using these methods with people who have intellectual disabilities because it can lead to serious problems. These methods can take away the person's own communication and replace it with another person's message.

Background and definitions

Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Some people have difficulty speaking because of a disability. They might use different ways to communicate, like pictures, signs, or symbols. These are called Augmentative and Alternative Communication. This includes many methods and tools that help a person communicate if they have difficulty with speech. This includes things like communication boards, speech-generating devices, or apps on an iPad. It also includes the way people use their bodies to get their messages across.

Feature-matching assessment for communication aids. Sometimes, people with intellectual disabilities need help to find the best communication method for them. A speech pathologist can do a 'feature matching' assessment to find out what works well for each person. The assessment looks at the person's skills and needs, and matches these to the communication tools and methods that suit them. This helps the person with intellectual disability to communicate as well as they can. This assessment matches a person's strengths and communication needs with the right communication tools and strategies. It helps the person communicate as independently as possible. A speech pathologist does this assessment.

Authorship of messages produced using a communication aid. Sometimes, another person might help someone to use a communication board or speech device to communicate. But it is important to make sure that the message is really from the person with intellectual disability, not from the other person. Authorship means

knowing who is making the message with a communication aid. This is important when someone else is helping with communication because we need to know that the message is coming from the person with the disability or from the other person.

What are Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method? There are some methods that people say are helping the person with intellectual disabilities to communicate, but there is no scientific evidence that supports these claims. They are called Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method (this is also called ‘Spelling to Communicate’ or even just ‘spelling’). A lot of research has shown that people using Facilitated Communication are not the ones writing the message. Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method both involve using letters on an alphabet board or a speech device. The facilitator (a person without disability) touches the person with disability while they point to the letters. The facilitator might look at the board or device more than the person with disability, who might not look at the board and might often look away from it while the spelling is happening. The facilitator might also talk to the person with disability and tell them what to do.

Key Points of the Position Statement

1. Do not use Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method

These techniques should not be used with people who have intellectual disabilities because they can create ethical risks and problems. For example, they can take away a person’s ability to make their own choices and can increase the risk of harm. The person may not be the one creating the messages. This raises concerns about informed consent and not knowing their true thoughts and desires.

2. Do not use Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method for Decision-Making Processes

Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method should not be used when helping a person make important decisions (Supported or Shared Decision-Making). The problem is that the facilitator (the person without a disability) can influence or control the messages, even without meaning to. This means that the message might not reflect what the person with the disability wants to say. This can lead to serious consequences, such as the person losing their rights or not having their own voice heard.

3. Messages produced using Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method may not be the person’s own thoughts

Any messages produced using Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method should not be assumed to come from the person with the disability. There is a risk that the messages are the thoughts of the facilitator rather than the person with the disability. This should be checked by identifying who is the author of the message using established methods for finding out who has written the message.

4. All people with Communication Disability have a right to an independent assessment of who is writing the messages

People who have used these techniques have the right to an independent assessment to find out who is creating the messages. This is important to make sure that the communication is genuinely coming from the person with the disability and not being influenced by someone else.

5. All people with Communication Disability should have access to comprehensive communication assessments

People with intellectual disabilities who have difficulty speaking should have access to a speech pathology assessment that looks at their communication abilities and needs. This assessment is called a "feature-matching assessment" and helps find the best communication tools and supports for the person's independent communication. It's important that the person's rights to communicate independently are respected. Everyone should respect and recognise their body language, gestures, facial expressions, voice sounds, and other forms of communication, alongside any speech or use of communication aids.

Further Information

About Facilitated Communication and Rapid Prompting Method:

Facilitated Communication involves a person with a disability pointing to letters on a board with the physical guidance of a facilitator. The facilitator often touches the person while they are pointing to the letters, but this can lead to the facilitator unintentionally influencing what is being communicated. Rapid Prompting Method is similar but involves the facilitator holding the communication board and giving prompts to guide the person's pointing. Both methods can make the person dependent on the facilitator, and the facilitator might be controlling what is being communicated without realizing it.

Warnings and Concerns

There is no evidence that either Facilitated Communication or Rapid Prompting Method allows people with intellectual disabilities to communicate independently. Research shows that messages produced using these methods often show the facilitator's

thoughts, not the thoughts of the person with the disability. Many organisations warn against using these methods because they can take away the person's own voice and deny their communication rights.

Communication Rights

Everyone has the right to communicate in their own way, including people with intellectual disabilities. They should be provided with communication methods that support their independence and accurately show their thoughts and wishes. It's important to make sure that any communication method involving help from another person is carefully monitored to protect the person's own voice.

Protecting Communication Rights

Ensuring independent communication

People with intellectual disabilities should have access to multiple communication methods and tools that support their independence. This might include communication boards or aids, speech-generating devices, key word signs or other methods that don't rely on someone else guiding their communication.

Monitoring New Technologies

As new technologies like Generative AI become more common in communication tools, it's important to monitor how they are used to make sure they don't replace the person's voice with the technology's output. The person should be able to check and control what the technology is saying on their behalf.

In summary, it is important to protect the communication rights of people with intellectual disabilities by using methods that allow them to communicate independently and ensuring that their own thoughts and wishes are accurately represented.