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State of Vermont
Agency of Human Services
Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation
103 South Main Street
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Dear Friends and Colleagues:

Facilitated communication training is a technique that assists some people who do not talk or cannot speak clearly to communicate. The technique has been found to help individuals acquire the skills necessary to independently use communication aids. The process has been used in Vermont with children and adults who have a variety of diagnoses including autism, cerebral palsy and intellectual impairment.

There have been some remarkable success stories about people with severe disabilities being able to communicate clearly for the first time in their lives. Studies and reports have shown the technique to be valid and beneficial. However, there has also been skepticism about the process of facilitated communication. There are concerns that it does not accomplish what it asserts. Some people believe that the facilitators, and not the people using facilitated communication, are doing the communicating. Apprehension about the use of facilitated communication has been stimulated by a number of recent media presentations and published research studies that depict the technique as invalid, and even detrimental to people with disabilities and their families. In light of this conflict, it is important to look closely at how it is being taught and practiced. Efforts need to be taken to ensure communications are those of the person being facilitated.

The Vermont Facilitated Communication Network has developed validation and best practices guidelines which highlight techniques, supports, and documentation that, when used, will increase the degree of certainty legitimate facilitated communication is taking place. The Division of Mental Retardation supports the use and practice of these guidelines when people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities are taught to communicate through facilitated communication. Attached are copies of these guidelines. If you have questions about them, or how best to put them into operation, contact the Division of Mental Retardation or the Vermont Facilitated Communication Network.

Sincerely,

Charles Moseley, Director
Division of Mental Retardation

VERMONT FACILITATED COMMUNICATION NETWORK

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The Vermont Facilitated Communication Network supports the use of facilitated communication training (FCT) as a viable technique to assist individuals who have difficulties with expressive communication. The following practice and validation guidelines are presented as safeguards against improper FCT and to help ensure valid communication when using FCT.

FACILITATED COMMUNICATION TRAINING: PRACTICE GUIDELINES

1. *Facilitators are trained and work under close monitoring and competent supervision.*

2. *The individual needs to have ongoing input into the communication process.*

3. *The individual team is involved on an ongoing basis with the planning and implementation of FCT. Active support and supervision is provided to the individual's treatment team.*

4. *Individuals are supported by more than one facilitator, and by facilitators with whom they have ongoing and regular involvement.*

5. *Individuals have access to facilitation across environments, and with the communication aid of choice for the individual.*

6. *There is an understanding that individuals using facilitated communication are in a process of learning and developing communication skills (including literacy) and that they will progress at their own level and speed.*

7. *The goal of independence in communication is emphasized throughout training. However, it is understood that some individuals who will not be able to reach independence in their typing are still able to type valid communications.*

8. *FCT is seen as but one means of assisting an individual to communicate. FCT is part of on overall structured plan of communication training to enable an individual to develop better communication (and literacy) skills. This plan needs to include ongoing individualized and documented assessment, instruction and evaluation.*

9. *Validation of the source of typing is an integral and natural part of the process of learning to use facilitated communication.*

FACILITATED COMMUNICATION TRAINING: VALIDATION GUIDELINES

The Vermont Facilitated Communication Network

1. *Clarify statements that are made through facilitation. Determine the meaning of what the person is trying to say by asking questions that illuminate their typed communication. (e.g., be aware of incomplete and ambiguous statements, be aware of an individual's literacy and communication skills.)*

2. *Be aware of possible language impairments (as opposed to speech impairments) in the individual who uses FC. (e.g., word-finding problems, allegorical descriptions, single-word descriptors that may have multiple interpretations.) Clarification may be needed to determine if the individual's initial communication is their intended communication.*

3. *Assess whether the facilitator follows recommended facilitated communication practices to ensure the facilitator is not responsible for the communication. (e.g., uses proper physical technique, insists the individual looks at communication board when using FC, has a history of fading supports.)*

4. *Assess the validity of the source of the individual's typing by using naturalistic methods. For example, use:*

   a. *Stylistic analysis of content (Collection and documentation of a variety of circumstances when the FC user distinguishes their typing as their own. e.g., Does the FC user consistently use the same unconventional spelling or grammar across facilitators, or use unusual words or sayings to communicate? Does the FC user pass information unknown to the facilitator in ordinary conversation?)*

   b. *Analysis of positive outcomes in behavior (e.g., Does the FC user show atypical increases in on-task behavior, decreases in aggression, increases in positive social interaction, increased eye contact, increase in meaningful speech, and/or allowance of prolonged physical contact by the facilitator)*

   c. *Non-confrontational formalized testing (e.g., The use of reading-for-comprehension activities that allows a sufficient length of time, upwards of 30-60 minutes, for the FC user to report the information. Flexibility that allows the tester to provide clarifying questions or to engage in open-ended conversation for an extended period of time before the FC user can provide the specific information requested.)*

   d. *Independent typing (e.g., Does the FC user type independently under certain situations and/or when typing certain content?)*

5. *Confirm the validity of the individual's communication through an outside and objective facilitator. (This step in assessing the validity of an individual's communication should only be done under extraordinary circumstances, such as when allegations of abuse are made through facilitated communication.)*