INSTITUTE ON COMMUNICATION AND INCLUSION at Syracuse University

Handling Sensitive Information and Allegations of Abuse Typed by FC Users: Getting and Giving Support

It is essential that facilitators, school or agency personnel have procedures in place to appropriately and supportively respond in the event that an FC user communicates sensitive information or allegations of abuse in their presence. This memo can serve as a resource for facilitators to consult when faced with this type of situation.

Mandatory Reporting Requirements:

Information with corroborating evidence of any kind should be responded to as appropriate under mandatory reporting laws in your area and agency. These procedures vary by state, so it is important to become familiar with the state/local requirements. Questions regarding mandatory reporting procedures can be directed to the Institute on Communication and Inclusion or another local agency or resource center. FC users should be informed about this process in order to feel prepared and in control of the circumstances. As the facilitator you can still tell the person what you have to do and why you have to do it, so that you are always keeping the person informed about what will happen next- to the best of your ability. Tell the individual that you will need to tell someone else (e.g. the principal, school nurse, group home director) about what you have been talking about. It's important that they not have any more surprises, and have as much control as possible

Click here for information about mandatory reporting procedures in New York State

Enlist the Services of a Naive Facilitator

If sensitive-reportable information is conveyed by an FC user, the first step is to have the authorship of the claim verified through the use of a naive facilitator (a highly skilled facilitator that is unaware of the content or topic that is being discussed). The most effective way to gain access to the appropriate naive facilitator is to contact the Institute on Communication and Inclusion (or your local FC training agency) and request this service. It is important that facilitators maintain confidentiality around the sensitive-reportable information during this process.

Though the corroboration of a naive facilitator is always recommended, alternative forms of message passing may also be used to further confirm the validity of the content in question. Alternate means of independent communication, such as word boards, pictures, etc., can also be used to confirm the message. If the message cannot be confirmed a second time, it is important that facilitators act appropriately to help the person feel safe and heard.

Be an Active Listener

When confronted with a sensitive topic, it is essential that the facilitator allow the FC user to choose how and what to say to articulate his/her feelings and not be confronted with the facilitator's interpretation of how he/she "must" be feeling. Avoid yes/no questions since this type of questioning forces the conversation in the direction that the facilitator chooses, rather than the allowing the person to control what they say and how much they reveal, at his/her own pace.

Be Supportive of the Communicator

Talking about sensitive information is hard work and stressful situations can impact the fluency of communication. The facilitator should maintain composure and monitor their own facial expressions, tone of voice, posture and inquiry strategies. A facilitator's emotional response to the content being conveyed should not interfere with the communication of the message. Rather, the focus should be on the FC user saying what they need to say. Therefore, it is recommended that facilitators:

- Encourage the FC user to continue sharing their experience
- Acknowledge the difficulty of talking about such sensitive information
- Show appreciation for the FC user's trust

Get Support for Yourself

Situations involving sensitive information or allegations of abuse can be challenging to handle. It is recommended that facilitators seek out counseling or support to help them work through difficult situations. It is important to remember, however, to maintain confidentiality and respect the FC user's privacy in all settings.