

**PRESENTATION**  
**Vermont**  
**October 26<sup>th</sup> 2010**

**Henna Laulainen**

I am a 24-year-old Finn. I have a brother named Toni. We live fairly close to each other. I live in a group home in Hirvisuo.

I used to live at home with my mother. Living at home is not independent living. While still at school I decided that I wanted to be independent like all young people. I took a training course for the trainable in Mankkaa. From there I moved to Keskuspuisto Vocational Institute's autism unit in Malmi, and then to Vateko to be trained in the textile sector. Now I attend the Activity Center Services in Vallila.

It is hard to live with autism. It makes everyday life difficult. I need helpers to explain things to me. Life can be extremely difficult for someone with autism. New situations and new people present challenges that must be overcome.

My life is now much easier than it was earlier. My mother and other people important to me have helped me cope with situations and life. I no longer need as much support as I did when I was a child, for example. Today, I enjoy the hugs that I couldn't take while I was still a child. My life is happy and I have people who help and love me. Today, it is even nice to come into contact with strangers.

I want to tell you that people with autism want just the same things as all other young people. To study and find paid employment. We want the option of living as independently as possible. I am sure that you understand what I mean.

Communication by writing has opened a new world for me. I can describe how I feel, I can think things over in a way I could not do otherwise. If I could not write I would have to think over things in my head alone. Now I can express my thoughts and hopes.

I started to communicate via FC when I was in Mankkaa school. I often watched how Sinikka, my speech therapist, and one student typed by using FC. I found it interesting. I wanted to try it but I had no means to tell about it. Fortunately Sinikka noticed my interest. She asked whether I wanted to try it. Of course I wanted. First she asked what my first name was. Then my last name. Then the name of the country we were live, what was the name of the capital city. At that point she asked my teacher to come over. Henna was able to type by using FC. At that point we also bought a new computer for home use. I started to practice with my mother every day. At first it was just a few words. This is it how it began. I think I was nine years old.

We started facilitation with the support under my hand. I call it split finger. The support was gradually moved under my wrist, elbow, and, then on my shoulder. Nowadays it is often enough that my mother holds her hand behind my back. The warmth of the hand resting on the back of a chair makes me feel safe. My personal aide supports me under my elbow. Writing is not possible at all if there is no trust between the writer and the facilitator.

I have tried to be persistent when practicing typing. I have tried to become as independent as possible. The assistants in my group home have frequently changed. It worries me because I am not able to move on well with my writing there. Many of them do not understand the central idea of the writing process.

I have spoken=written a lot about facilitated communication in many occasions. I have been to schools, in parent meetings, and in training sessions for teachers. I have also visited the Children's Castle Hospital and talked to the staff about facilitated communication. I liked the visit there as people were open-minded. I have known some of the staff members since I was a child. I am grateful to the staff of the hospital for all the support we got when we practiced how to communicate.

Even today people have differing opinions on facilitated communication. I tell you - do not hesitate but open your minds. Facilitated communication is a means of speaking for us autistic people. It is our way to get our voices heard in this world.

I have felt that communication has made my life easier in many ways. For example, when we go to a doctor I can talk with the doctor myself. Before FC people were just guessing how I felt. It was frustrating.

I can get my voice heard through writing. I will be able to tell about my feelings and opinions. I can talk about issues that bother me. In addition I can exchange ideas with other people.

I am a member of a literature club. We write about autism there. We talk about our experiences and everything else related to our lives. Without facilitated communication I would also be left out from this.

Trust between people is important in facilitated communication. If a facilitator doubts the writer, the game is lost. The thoughts of a facilitator need to be on the same wavelength with the writer. The facilitator needs to focus fully on the task at hand. If his thoughts are somewhere else, facilitated writing is not possible. I sense if someone's thoughts are somewhere else, if he is nervous, or if he is annoyed. All this distracts me from concentrating on facilitated communication.

We have travelled a long road to the point where I can write well. You can well imagine that this required a lot of work.

From time to time I have wept and written, sweated and almost lost hope. Luckily my mother had enough faith in my abilities, and Sinikka, too.

I would like to get a job and earn a living like others do. Getting a job can be really difficult. But we must hope for the best.

I hope that you and people in general will believe in those of us who are autistic. Writing is my speech and the thing you need to understand. Those of us who are autistic have the same kinds of feelings as all you others have. Although we may behave oddly, we are really not oddities.

Thanks.