

# **Alert Program<sup>®</sup> Overview: Supporting Children with Autism**

*by Mary Sue Williams and  
Sherry Shellenberger*

**We believe that all behavior is a child's best attempt to communicate. Also, we believe that by understanding self-regulation and sensory issues, we can better support optimal functioning. And that can help children to not only show us their talents and gifts, but live their days happily and interact comfortably in the world.**

## **Self-Regulation**

As occupational therapists, we teach that self-regulation is the ability to change how alert we feel. In the Alert Program<sup>®</sup>, we tell children and their parents, "your body is like a car engine, sometimes it runs on high, sometimes it runs on low, and sometimes it runs just right."

We self-regulate every hour of every day. Self-regulation is the foundation of everything we do; it affects how well we interact with others and our environment, but typically we never think about our "engines" or how our level of alertness affects our ability to function.

Say you need to type a report at work. If your "engine" is in a high state (you're feeling hyper), it will be more difficult to do your best work. If your "engine" is in a low state (you're feeling lethargic), writing the report may take longer. If your "engine" is in a "just right" state (you're feeling alert and focused), you will be more likely to complete the report quickly and effectively.

The same is true for children, those developing typically and those with autism and other special needs. Through the Alert Program, the goal is not for engines to be in "just right" all day long. The goal is to enable our children to change how alert they feel so they can be "just right" for whatever they want to do: learning, working, playing, relaxing, or interacting with our friends and family.

We all have engines. Some of our engines just rev a little higher or lower than others, and some need a little more help to attain a "just right" state of alertness. One of the best things about helping children to obtain an optimal state using the Alert Program is how we talk with them. Instead of fall back phrases like: "Calm down, you're out of control," the Alert Program emphasizes the use of non-judgmental language and helps children choose engine strategies: "Gee, looks like

your engine's in high gear. Shall we jump ten times or take some deep breaths together?"

### **Overview of the Alert Program**

We developed our first book, *"How Does Your Engine Run?"*® A Leader's Guide to the Alert Program® for Self-Regulation for parents, teachers, therapists and children to learn about the importance of self-regulation. The Alert Program is a practical approach to help all team members choose strategies to change or maintain appropriate states of alertness at home, school, or other settings.

The Alert Program is based on how the body processes sensory information. You may be familiar with the "sensory diet" concept ([www.avanit-ed.com](http://www.avanit-ed.com)). Just as we need a nutritional diet, we need a sensory diet with input from our traditional senses, as well as movement and gravity. In the Alert Program, we explain the sensory diet concept to children in more simple terms. We teach there are five ways to change how alert we feel: put something in your mouth, move, touch, look, and listen.

Let's look at an example of how we as adults use engine strategies (part of our sensory diet) to self-regulate. When sitting in a dark movie theater, where we would have the tendency to drop into a low state, we might crunch on popcorn (mouth), drink an ice cold drink (mouth), rock in the chair if it's an upscale theater (move), hold our friend's hand in the scary parts (touch) while we watch the action on the big screen (look) and jump out of our seats (move) with the loud surround sound (listen)! When we realize what we as adults do to change how alert we feel, then we are better able to observe and support children.

As adults, we support self-regulation in infants quite naturally. We would comfort a baby who was breathing quickly, maybe crying, tightening her little arms and legs, perhaps flushing. We might offer a bottle (mouth) or rock her (move). We might swaddle her (touch), dim the lights (look), or sing a lullaby (listen). Similarly, if she is slow to rise and needs help to awaken, we might again offer a bottle (mouth), gently bounce her arrhythmically (move), swiftly rub her arms and legs (touch), take her outside or into bright light (look), or sing her a silly song (listen).

In this example, obviously, we are not suggesting to use the engine analogy with an infant, "Your engine's low, hit the gas, wake up!" Children of any age do not need to be able to talk about their engines

in order for adults to help provide sensory strategies. If a parent suspects a child is having difficulty processing sensory information at a loud, crowded birthday party, he might think to himself, "Looks like my son's engine is in high." Then, in a gentle tone of voice, he might say to his son, "Let's go outside and push on a wall."

### **Engines on High!**

Many children on the autism spectrum are experiencing difficulties with self-regulation or sensory overload (engines on very high alert). They can't take in and make sense of what they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Sensation and movement can be so confusing to their nervous systems that their bodies go into fight, flight, or fright.

The fight, flight, fright response helps protect our bodies from danger. That's the response we need if a tiger is coming at us. Sensory overload is a commonly overlooked reason why a child goes into a fight, flight, or fright state. Remember: whether the threat is real or perceived, it can still trigger stress chemistry. For those who do not process sensory information well, the world feels unsafe and overwhelming. The Alert Program teaches how to observe, offer strategies, and create environments where sensory information can be processed better. No child should live in a world full of charging tigers.

### **Reading Engine Signals**

When adults understand what sensory overload signals the child is giving, powerful changes can occur. The Alert Program teaches the team how to observe signals such as dilated pupils, changes in breath and skin color, clenching, sweating, or more subtle changes such eye aversion, finger-flaring, or hiding under the table.

It takes good detectives and observers to read engine signals, but it's not rocket science. By reading Alert Program books or attending a training, parents and school staff easily learn how to support self-regulation. Adults report that offering engine strategies doesn't take more time, but saves time and can decrease behavioral outbursts.

The Alert Program emphasizes the benefits of setting up the child's nervous system for success. In one of many research projects, occupational therapists found the Alert Program to be effective in helping children to "self-regulate, change tasks, organize themselves, cope with sensory challenges, and focus on tasks in the classroom" (Barnes, Karin, et. al., 2008).

If we believe that all behavior is the child's best attempt to communicate, then we can learn to be "detectives" to decipher the sometimes confusing signals and offer appropriate strategies to support engines running "just right." (*Take Five: Staying Alert at Home and School* goes into more detail with lists of activities and suggestions.)

### **Why Heavy Work Activities?**

The Alert Program frequently recommends heavy work activities because heavy work "works" when engines are in high or in low states of alertness. Activities that involve pushing, pulling, tugging, towing, and carrying heavy objects help engines to rev up or cool down to return to a "just right" state where it's easier to interact, learn, and play.

Through the Alert Program's games and songs, children learn how to independently choose their own heavy work activities and engine strategies with guidance from their adults. The snappy rhythms of the *Just Right Song* and *Five Ways Song* make identifying engine states and choosing engine strategies fun. Our Alert: Go Fish!, Alert Bingo, and Keeping on Track board games reinforce the self-regulation concepts through visually appealing themes like cars racing, monkeys on a playground, ducks at school, and dogs playing poker.

### **Who can be an Alert Program Leader?**

Anyone - parent, teacher, or therapist - can be a leader of the Alert Program, but we strongly suggest that at least one person on the team be familiar with sensory processing theory and self-regulation. Usually this person is the occupational therapist on the team. We recommend she be available to coach and consult regarding more complicated sensory/behavior situations.

When teaching the Alert Program, team members can share honestly about their own adult engine. In this way children learn even more. A parent might say, "Boy, I had a hard day at work and my engine is in high right now. To cool down my engine, I'm going to go read the newspaper for a little bit."

### **Engine Vocabulary**

Using engine vocabulary bridges the gap of our jargon on teams so we can focus on what is best for the child. When adults talk about a child's engine (whether or not the child is participating in labeling engine levels for themselves), they create better communication and solutions.

For example, a parent of a child with autism who is non-verbal may have a spiral notebook that is sent back and forth to school for notes. After the team is familiar with the Alert Program, the mother may write in the morning before school, "John 's engine is in high this morning. Our alarm clock didn't go off so all of our engines are in high this morning. Good luck!"

The teacher would read the notebook when the child entered the classroom with a much better idea of how to begin the school day. Then the teacher might ask the child to carry a box of books down to the office (heavy work activity). Providing heavy work would help the child's engine return to a "just right" level for learning. Throughout the day the teacher would provide other "engine strategies" such as chewing on a straw (mouth), pushing on a wall or doing chair push ups (move), sitting on a minimally inflated beach ball (touch and move), wearing sunglasses (look), or listening to music through headphones (listen).

At the end of school day, the teacher might write in the notebook to the parent, "You were right. John's engine was in high gear when he got off the bus but we gave him extra engine supports today. But then right before loading the bus, we had a fire drill. Sorry. Good luck!"

But the team does not need to use only the engine analogy. We initially introduce the engine vocabulary because it is a common analogy that many children enjoy. Use any descriptors that have meaning for the child (sounds, colors, animals, etc.) Choose words that are most useful to children to describe their inner experience of self-regulation. If a child loves dinosaurs then you might use raptors for a high state of alertness, brontosaurus for low, and stegosaurus for just right.

Some children will never be independent in self-regulation. For those on the autism spectrum who are non-verbal, for those who have significant developmental delays, or for those whom language is challenging, the concept of an engine may be too abstract. Rather than talking about their engines, they could point to photos taken when they were in high, low, and just right. Or adults might only offer engine strategies, without labeling engines. An adult might say, "Today, in the car, do you want to take your Silly Putty?" Remember the goal is not to be excellent at labeling levels of alertness, the goal is to help children self-regulate.

**In Summary...**

If your engine has been idling nicely and you were attending easily as you read this, then you already know about self-regulation. We hope the Alert Program renews, refreshes, and refuels your ways of supporting children, so their engines can run "just right."

*To learn more about Alert Program books, songs, games, and trainings visit: **www.AlertProgram.com**. For more research and evidence-based practice, including Barnes, Karin, et. al., 2008 article, click on our website's Resources Button.*