

Sensory Challenges and Sensory Solutions for Children and Caregivers

By Kelly Dolde

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It is likely that, at this very moment, competition for your attention is fierce. While you are reading these words, your brain is being bombarded with countless pieces of sensory information per second, most of which is irrelevant to the task at hand. Can you keep reading? That depends. Do you feel lethargic, like a couch potato? Do you feel wound up and hyper? Or do you feel alert and it's easy to concentrate to read these words?

How alert you feel affects your brain's ability to process sensory input. Identifying one's own arousal state and learning how to self-regulate (how to change how alert one feels) are concepts that Christy Kennedy, OTR/L, uses when working with children with sensory processing disorders. She does this by introducing the "How Does Your Engine Run?"[®] Alert Program[®] for Self-Regulation (1996) created by occupational therapists, Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger. According to Kennedy, it is equally important for parents, teachers and therapists working with these children to understand their own individual arousal states and how their arousal state affects others. Indeed, everyone benefits from understanding this key piece of information about themselves and the Alert Program's engine analogy is a simple and effective means to reach this goal.

Kennedy is based in Decatur, Georgia and has spent two decades working with children with sensory processing disorders. "The Alert Program is a pivotal part of my services. The engine terminology (engines in high, low, and just right) and categories of strategies (mouth, move, touch, look, and listen) are introduced to all children (those who have enough receptive language). The child's entire family is also encouraged to participate in using the terminology and ideally strategies. Children as young as four years have demonstrated the ability to identify their engine speeds and to even use basic Engine Helpers [sensorimotor strategies] to support recovery when guided by an adult."

Kennedy has three goals when working with her clients. "The first is to facilitate new neurological pathways in their nervous system as much as there is potential to do so," she says. "The second goal is the arousal piece where the child is supported in becoming aware of how they feel, what influences the way they feel and what works for them to change how they feel if they are not in a 'just right' place. I again rely on the Alert Program with all my clients and gear the program to each child's own level of understanding."

"My third goal, which coincides with teaching the child, is to teach the parents about the concept of arousal, its associations with sensory stimulus, and what behaviorally it looks like when a child (or anyone for that matter) is processing sensory input effectively and non-effectively."

"Often times," Kennedy continues, "I need to help the parents learn to see the more subtle signs of arousal state changes, the warning signs so to speak, to know that their child's nervous system is moving towards overload (high engine level) or is lacking in

stimulus and/or intensity to help them stay engaged (low engine level). Sometimes, it is the parent's own nervous system that is interfering with their ability to see what is happening to their child. Additionally, parents may come in with a preconceived interpretation that their child's behavior is voluntary. In my training about arousal, I am teaching the parent to become a detective with me, helping me make associations between what sensory stimulus is organizing and what stimulus is disorganizing, and for how long. Training the parents to be a partner with me for this role is crucial. Both the child and I need the parent to carry over outside of the therapy session the 'in the moment' associations between how the child feels and what they can do about it. Helping the parent to understand this correlation can also help the parent to be more understanding of their child's behavior and to be more successful in supporting desired behavioral changes. This, in turn, will help to maximize the child's skill development potential."

Kennedy continues, "If a child comes into a therapy session in high arousal or a 'high Engine speed,' regardless of their disability or the reason why, I have to address their arousal state first. If I don't, then I will be working against a nervous system that isn't in the best place for learning. It's like asking an exhausted adult to come home after a long day of work and sit down and learn how to do a task that is tedious and arduous, but one that they must do well, like fill out a tax form. Even if the adult were cooperative, they would not do their best work because their brain could not function optimally. I must also factor in my own arousal state when I enter into a session because if I am tired, distracted or irritable for whatever reason, my arousal state will directly affect my client's arousal state...Engine speeds are contagious!"

Kennedy is always looking for new ways to engage her clients. In her Engine Camp this summer, she incorporated two of the three new Alert Program games including **Alert: Go Fish!** and **Alert Bingo** [The **Keeping On Track** board game was not published in time to use at her camp]. Also, in her camp she uses Alert Program songs because she has found that "introduction of the music component has had a surprisingly positive impact....I sent home the words and parents are reporting that their children are singing and saying the lyrics on their own." Demonstrating their new-found knowledge with carry over to home, when parents asked, "What can you do to help your Engine?" the children answered by using lyrics from the song, such as "hold a fidget in my hand."

Through Kennedy's outstanding therapeutic services and her work to educate those in her community about sensory integration and self-regulation, these types of positive outcomes are common among parents, teachers, and therapists.

Christy Kennedy, OTR/L, received her BS in Occupational Therapy from the Medical College of Georgia in 1981. She completed a three-month study program with the Cincinnati OT Institute focusing on Sensory Integration evaluation and treatment in 1988. She currently runs a private practice in Decatur, Georgia, that offers therapy for children, instruction for parents, and features a camp program during the summer. To learn more about Alert Program books, games, and songs visit our website: www.AlertProgram.com

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