

# **Brief Overview of the Alert Program<sup>®</sup> for Parents**

**by Mary Sue Williams**

As parents, we all want to help our children to grow, play, and learn. For our young ones, perhaps we hope they will learn to dress themselves, learn to write their name, or learn good table manners. You might be surprised to learn that self-regulation is the basis of these and all goals we have for our children. Why? "Self-regulation is the ability to attain, maintain, or change how alert one feels appropriately for a task or situation" (Williams & Shellenberger, 1996, pg 1-5).

For example, if we want to teach a child to tie shoes, the child first needs to be in an optimal state for learning. If she is hyper or wildly unfocused (in a high state of alertness) or if she is lethargic and droopy (in a low state of alertness), it will be challenging, at best, for the child to learn shoe tying skills. If the child is in an optimal state (alert, attentive, and focused), the child is much more likely to succeed and we are less likely to see behavioral outbursts while trying to encourage shoe tying.

The Alert Program<sup>®</sup> (also known as the "How Does your Engine Run?"<sup>®</sup> Alert Program<sup>®</sup> for Self-Regulation) was created by occupational therapists, Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger. The program was developed to teach children how to change how alert they feel and to teach adults how to support learning, attending, and positive behaviors. By using an engine analogy, children learn "if your body is like a car engine, sometimes it runs on high, sometimes it runs on low, and sometimes it runs just right."

This easy-to-teach, practical program shows parents, teachers, and therapists how to choose appropriate strategies and activities so children's engines are running "just right." Students learn what they can do at circle time or at homework time to attain an optimal state of alertness. Teachers learn what they can do after lunch, when their adult nervous systems are in a low state but their students are in a high alert state (running in from the playground after recess). Parents learn what they can do to help siblings change from a high state to a more appropriate low state at bedtime. And schools learn what they can do district-wide to set students up for success.

The Alert Program teaches children and their adults a wide range of simple, low-budget strategies and activities that can be incorporated easily into home and school routines. Heavy work activities are recommended most often in the program because “heavy work works when engines are in high or low gear.” By reading the Alert Program’s books or by attending a training, parents can learn more about how to help children do heavy work activities such as pushing, pulling, tugging, towing, and/or carrying heavy objects.

Let’s look at an example of how easily heavy work activities can be incorporated into daily routines at home: How can the Alert Program concepts be used by a mother who wants to teach her son shoe tying skills? Before teaching any skill, first take a moment to observe and ask: “Is my child in an optimal state for learning right now?” If he is in a high alert state or a low alert state, offer a heavy work activity by saying something like: “Would you please help me by carrying these books (laundry basket or box of toys) upstairs to your bedroom? Then come down and let’s practice your shoe tying.” Keep a close eye on your child as you are teaching shoe tying. Some children may be able to remain alert, attentive, and focused for longer periods of time than others. Some may need a movement break in the middle of the activity. You might notice that after five minutes of concentrating, your child dips into a low state (lethargic and droopy). If so, suggest that he go find two more shoes with shoestrings in his closet. Ask your son if he’d like to pretend to be a snake, elephant, or rabbit on his way to the closet. Then, encourage him to slither on the floor like a snake, stomp like a huge elephant, or jump like a bunny. In this way, you are providing heavy work to his muscles so that he will return with the shoes in an optimal state of alertness, ready for more shoe tying practice.

Over 20,000 parents, teachers, therapists, and administrators have been trained in using the Alert Program world-wide since 1990. Thousands upon thousands more, who have not attended a training, have read the books, sung songs, or played games created by Williams and Shellenberger to support children’s self-regulation.

In one of many research projects, the Alert program was found 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 J., et. al., 2008).

Parents will be happy to learn that administrators are understanding

the importance of self-regulation by implementing the Alert Program school-wide and district-wide. For example, an outstanding pilot study in Winnipeg has in-serviced teachers in 31 elementary schools. They first offered Alert Program trainings to all of their kindergarten teachers. The next year, all of their first grade teachers were trained. Then year by year, each grade level continues to be trained on how to support self-regulation. After learning how to implement the Alert Program concepts into her classroom, one of the teacher in this district observed, "I don't say SIT STILL AND PAY ATTENTION anymore. Now, I have access to tools that I have seen work." Another teacher commented, "The Alert Program gave me a better understanding of what kids need to succeed." Their district director of student services believes, "The Alert Program needs to be a core competency and a starting point for getting ready to learn."

Fortunately, a growing number of administrators, teachers, and parents are learning the importance of self-regulation and how it is the starting point for getting ready to learn. Using the Alert Program's engine vocabulary helps children to learn what they can do to change how alert they feel at school and home. After participating in Alert Program activities, one young child commented, "I did not know we have engines!" Williams and Shellenberger promote the idea that "we all have engines... some of ours just go a little higher or a little lower than others. And some need a little more help than others to find their just right level of alertness."

Introducing the engine vocabulary in a family is a wonderful opportunity to focus on the positive rather than negative behaviors of children. Let's be honest, as parents, our adult engines often go into high gear. Rather than shouting "You are out of control!" or "Go to your room!", with a calm tone of voice we could say, "Gosh, my engine is in high gear right now and looks like your engine is not in the best place for listening to me read this book aloud. Let's go to our recycling bin and stomp on some aluminum cans (heavy work). Then we can come back to read our book together."

The good news for parents is that many household chores and families' daily activities involve heavy work. So "when in doubt, do heavy work!" If your son's or daughter's engine is in high or low gear, ask them to help with the recycling, take out the trash, rake leaves, dig in the garden, stack fire wood, push the hamper or laundry basket to the washer, carry grocery bags in from the car, etc.

The trick is to remember to observe your child's level of alertness throughout the day and offer frequent "periods of movement followed by periods of concentration." Consider when you can incorporate heavy work type of tasks before your child needs to concentrate. For example, you might ask your son to take out the trash or rake leaves before he sits down to do his homework. You might ask your daughter to help dig in the garden prior to practicing her piano. Also, offering heavy work activities as "brain breaks" can be quite effective, e.g., asking your son to rake leaves as a movement break half way through his homework. Or asking your daughter to carry grocery bags in from the car after 20 minutes of reading in her school book.

When engines are in an optimal state at home and school, not only do children learn more easily, there can be less interfering behaviors. Parents have found less management of behavior is needed when they observe self-regulation and they offer heavy work strategies to obtain an optimal state of alertness. So remember: when in doubt, do heavy work activities to help engines run just right!

*Mary Sue Williams co-created the Alert Program<sup>®</sup> with Sherry Shellenberger and together have been co-owners of TherapyWorks, Inc. since 1990. They both are occupational therapists who have a joint vision to enhance the school experience of children. They believe, and inspire others to believe, that positive change can happen with the help of all educational team members (including parents) working together. Williams and Shellenberger have 30 years of experience working with and learning from a variety of children, parents, and teachers in urban and rural school districts as well as clinic, home, and camp settings. They have focused on developing practical ways to teach people of all ages how to incorporate sensory integration theory into every day living. They are authors of numerous books, booklets, games, and songs supporting self-regulation. For the past three decades, they have developed, refined, and kid-tested the Alert Program<sup>®</sup>. One of the authors' greatest joys is watching children find the answers to the question, "How Does Your Engine Run?"<sup>®</sup>. (To learn more go to [www.AlertProgram.com](http://www.AlertProgram.com))*

For an extensive list of Program articles, evidence, and research, visit our website at: [www.AlertProgram.com](http://www.AlertProgram.com). Highlights include:

Barnes, Karin J., Vogel, Kimberly A., Beck, Alison J., Schoenfeld, Heidi B. & Owen, Steven V. (2008). Self-regulation strategies of children with emotional disturbance, *Physical & Occupational Therapy In Pediatrics*, 28:4, 369-387.

Barros, R.M., Silver, E., & Stein, R.E. (2009). School recess and group classroom behavior. *Pediatrics*, 123:2, 431-436.

Bertrand, J. (2009). Interventions for children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs): Overview of findings for five innovative research projects. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 30, 986-1006.

The following Alert Program books, booklets, CD's, and games are available at [www.AlertProgram.com](http://www.AlertProgram.com):

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (1996). *"How Does Your Engine Run?"® A leader's guide to the Alert Program® for self-regulation*. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (2001). *Take five! Staying alert at home and school*. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (2006). *Test drive: Introducing the Alert Program® through song* [book & CD]. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (1992). An introduction to *"How Does Your Engine Run?"® The Alert Program® for self-regulation* [Booklet]. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (1995). *The Alert Program® with songs for self-regulation* [CD]. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (2008). *Alert: Go fish!* Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (2008). *Alert bingo*. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.

Williams, M.S., & Shellenberger, S. (2008). *Keeping on track: Alert Program® companion game*. Albuquerque, NM: TherapyWorks, Inc.