



The Alert Program for Self-Regulation

Adapted From: "The Alert Program for Self-Regulation" by Williams & Shellenberger

Have you heard children talking about their "engines" going too fast (hyper) or too slow (lethargic) or "just right" (attentive and focused)? If you haven't yet, you probably will soon. This terminology is adapted from "How Does Your Engine Run? The Alert Program for Self-Regulation" developed by two internationally known occupational therapists, Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger. The Alert Program assists children who have learning disabilities and attention problems (as well as typical children) to understand the basic theory of sensory integration related to their own alertness levels or arousal states. Through the program, children learn a repertoire of strategies that enhance their abilities to learn, interact with others, and work or play. Children not only learn to monitor their level of alertness, but improve in self-esteem, self-confidence and self-control.

This program provides a way for parents, teachers, and therapists to promote awareness of how individuals regulate their alertness levels and encourages the use of sensory-motor strategies. The program provides an easily understood way for young children and older students to monitor the signals that indicate an internal level of readiness to work, play, listen, attend and participate in the activities of life. By using the engine terminology to teach self-regulation (changing how alert we feel), the program helps children learn what to do if they are in a non-optimal state of alertness. It teaches children that there are various ways to change how alert they feel by using sensory-motor strategies (including movement, touch, visual input, auditory input, etc).

Self-Regulation for Adults

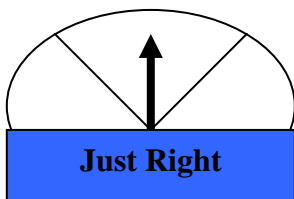
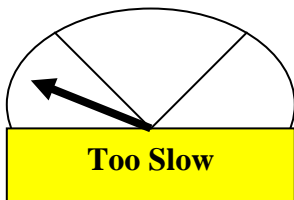
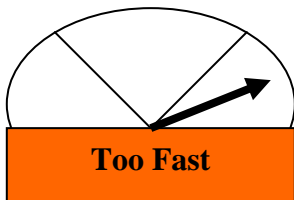
We all self-regulate throughout our day, but rarely do any of us talk about it. Most adults experience typical fluctuations in their ability to remain task-directed and productive throughout the day. This is because levels of arousal or alertness operate on a continuum with sluggish being on one end, hyper-alert being on the other, and optimal functioning in the middle. Adults do things like drink coffee in the morning and sing to the car radio on the way home from a stressful day at work to maintain optimal levels of alertness. In fact, many of us have developed a repertoire of strategies in order to calm down when we are excited or anxious and to psych ourselves up when we are tired or bored. For example, think about what you did this morning to get up and get going. To start your day, did you drink a hot cup of coffee? Before work, did you go for a jog or walk the dog (movement)? To relax after work, did you take a steamy hot bath/shower or pet your cat (touch/tactile input)? Did you watch TV (look/visual input) or turn on the radio (listen/auditory input)? These are all examples of how adults self-regulate using sensory-motor input.

Self-Regulation for Children

To be happy and successful at home and school, children also need to organize their behavior for a wide range of tasks and situations. The Alert Program is specifically designed to achieve the following goals:

- Teach children, parents, and teachers how to recognize alertness levels/arousal states as they relate to attention, learning, and behavior.
- Help children recognize and expand the number of self-regulation strategies they use in a variety of tasks and settings.
- Give therapists, parents, and teachers a framework (vocabulary, activities, and environments) to help children recognize and regulate their own alertness levels.
- Help parents and teachers understand that behavior may reflect the student's best attempt to respond adaptively and efficiently to the demands of a situation or task.

The Alert Program for Self-Regulation: Engine Terminology



The unifying framework of The Alert Program (or “How Does My Engine Run?”) involves comparing the child’s body to a car’s engine. This framework provides the very concrete “engine terms” that children will learn to apply to their own internal states. The Alert program uses this metaphor of a car’s engine to cue children when their own “internal motors” are running *too fast*, *too slow*, or *just right* and to teach children strategies to help each keep their “engines” running at *just right*. Children are also taught to develop a greater awareness of the “feel” of their own bodies when at different “engine speeds” (when running too fast, too slow, or just right), so they can begin to recognize these states in themselves without adult cueing.

Children begin to label their own engine speeds with the assistance of the concrete engine terminology as well as visual supports (*see examples on left*). They can then learn to use sensorimotor strategies to aid in self-regulation when their engines are running either too fast or too slow. Proactively using these sensorimotor strategies at various points in their day can assist children in self-regulation by keeping their engines in the “just right” range.

Implementation Stages

The Alert Program (or “How Does My Engine Run?”) is comprised of three stages; Identifying, Experimenting, and Self-Regulating. Through this three stage process, children are taught to determine how their engines are running and how to use predetermined strategies independently in order to successfully participate in the classroom and school environment.

During Stage One, Identifying, children learn their engine words (vocabulary words, use of speedometer) and develop an awareness of their levels (engine speeds). In this stage children begin to learn how to recognize their own internal levels of alertness. At first they will need adult prompting to do so. With repeated exposure and practice, eventually children learn to engage in this process more independently.

In Stage Two, Experimenting, trainers/teachers introduce a variety of sensorimotor strategies to the children for use in self-regulation. The children begin to choose which strategies work for them. As with stage one, in the beginning of this stage, children will need adult modeling and cuing to use these strategies; however, with repeated exposure and practice, eventually children learn to engage in this process more independently as well.

Stage Three, Self-Regulating, is the final stage of the Alert Program. During stage three, children learn to select and use strategies (engine breaks) independently. Children also learn to change engine levels when options for engine breaks are limited. It is important to note that often it is the case that only students functioning at a level of 8 years or older will attain Stage Three. Those who are developmentally younger than 8 may continue to need adult cueing. The amount of time a student needs to learn the various stages will vary depending on their age, cognitive, emotional, language abilities and sensorimotor needs.

Alert Program Introductory Lesson Ideas: Identifying Engine Speeds

- The adult introduces engine speed terminology to students using car [engine terminology sheets](#) that contain definitions and descriptive words. If introducing this to a whole group, consider making these sheets large enough for all students to see from their seats.
- The adult labels his/her own engine speed using a large [class speedometer](#) or an individual speedometer.
- Children make their own individual speedometers using paper plates, markers, etc.
- Children then chart their own engine speeds on the [class speedometer](#) or their own individual speedometers (if made).
- Children may also enjoy playing the “Guess that Engine Speed” game, using magazine pictures and the [engine speed posters](#). The adult shows pictures and has the child determine the engine speed of the individual pictured. The child can then fasten the magazine picture to the corresponding [engine speed poster](#).

Alert Program Introductory Lesson Ideas: Changing Engine Speeds

- Adults brainstorm with children regarding possible methods to change their engine speeds. Methods use sensorimotor strategies that are either calming (if the child’s engine is running too fast) or alerting (if the child’s engine is running too slow).
- Children practice changing their engine speeds by performing sensorimotor activities to obtain an optimum engine speed or alertness state (“just right”).

Additional Activities

- Children can use individual [engine speed identification worksheets \(fast, slow, just right\)](#) to further define what behaviors should and should not be using at each engine speed. The information from these 3 individual [engine worksheets](#) can then be added to the [engine speeds worksheet](#) and posted in the classroom to remind students and/or in a central location at home.
- Children can further explore the relationship between their feelings and “engine speeds” using the [engine speed-feelings worksheets](#).

- Teachers can set up an “Engine Check Station” in their classrooms; this station can contain movement or “engine break” options for students to perform, as well as [engine check feedback sheets](#) for students to document how the use of the engine break affected their behavior.
- An [alert program social story](#) can be developed to assist a child who may be having difficulty learning the program. It should be read/reviewed with him/her daily until s/he begins to understand the concept.
- Rather than incorporating the whole program, leaders may choose to use only the program’s vocabulary to identify how the student’s “engine is running”. The use of this vocabulary helps to avoid using negative words such as “hyper” or “out of control”.
- Students can be given the homework assignment of sharing the [Alert at Home Sheet](#) with parents/guardians to help them use this at home as well; for some students, having parents use the [Alert Questionnaire](#) could be also helpful.

Engine Breaks at Home

The following is a list of some ideas for various cognitive break activities that can be used during *home* routines to help children learn to self-regulate their level of attention.

During Transitions:

- Push heavy doors using both hands
- Carry groceries into the house
- When traveling, let your child pull his own suitcase on wheels

Meal Time:

- Mix and knead cookie dough
- Push or pull chairs in/out from the table
- Wipe the table after dinner with a large sponge and use hand muscles to squeeze
- Sip applesauce or thick milkshake through a straw

Homework Time:

- Eat chewy foods or crunchy foods as a snack before starting homework
- Sip water from a water bottle with a thin straw while working
- Chew gum while working
- Do chair push-ups
- Say “let’s pretend to make the room bigger” and push against the walls

Bath Time:

- After a bath, rub your child briskly with a large heavy towel, firmly squeezing his muscles
- Have him/her help fold the towel when done

Bed Time:

- Help fold a heavy quilt
- Wear tight flannel or soft snug pajamas
- Go “camping” with a heavy blanket pulled across a few chairs
- Change the sheets on the bed

Jobs and Chores (Inside):

- Put groceries away
- Clean the windows or the front of appliances (spray bottles are great for hand muscles)
- Carry the laundry basket
- Rearrange the bedroom furniture

Jobs and Chores (Outside):

- Sweep the porch or driveway
- Do yard work (rake leaves, etc)
- Shovel sand into a wheelbarrow, wheel the wheelbarrow to a spot, dump out sand and use a rake to level it out
- Carry buckets to water flowers, plants, trees
- Recycle (carry a box of cans or newspapers)
- Pull a heavy trashcan
- Stack the patio chairs

Additional On Line Resources

Various teaching materials and lessons for implementing the Alert Program can be found in *“How Does Your Engine Run”, Leader’s Guide and Take Five, Staying Alert at Home and School* by Mary Sue Williams & Sherry Shellenberger, available at www.AlertProgram.com

A 2006 article by Susan Cahill describing the use of the Alert Program as a whole class student behavior management system (titled *Classroom management for kids who won’t sit still and other “bad apples”*) from *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus* can be found at <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol3/iss1/art6>

<http://www.autismawarenesscentre.org/aaci-bookstore/multimedia/the-alert-program-with-songs-for-self-regulation.html>

http://www.toolsforkids.ca/Alert_program.htm