

# More progress less stress

**HANDLE, a programme of movement activities, is intended to build brain connections and enhance neurological systems that are causing difficulties in learning, task performance or social interaction. Sean Williams, a practitioner of the therapy, explains how he has seen it help children and adults live with greater ease and function with lower stress levels**

“Henry has become noticeably more calm and grounded and able to self-regulate, and his speech has improved”

**The delight of Alex's mother** after just two months of following a HANDLE (Holistic Approach to NeuroDevelopment and Learning Efficiency) programme was plain for all to see. Joanna says: “It's better and better. I can't believe what I see. I'm careful not to give myself too much hope, but it is big different, absolutely different.”

Even though Alex's communication was limited and he appeared inflexible at his HANDLE assessment, I could see his potential shining beneath the surface. As I spent time with him playing with toy trains I started to see some of the underlying issues that were standing in the way of his learning. He needed some help with regulating his stress response, his sense of balance and movement and his sense of his body in space (proprioception).

#### **Activities after school**

Alex and his family took home a programme of easy-to-learn HANDLE activities and spent time doing them every day after school. It involved particular head, face and body massages, and games using specific, organized movements and sometimes simple equipment such as a hoop or a torch. The programme helped regulate his autonomic nervous system and enhanced his sense of his body in relation to itself and to his environment.

Joanna, Alex's mother, says: “After just nine months Alex uses not only speech, but also eye contact, gestures and mimics to communicate. He seeks contacts with other kids, he plays with his toys and can find them. He solves problems: recently, he started to build pretty complicated train tracks. His eating has improved by far, he sleeps better. We still have a journey ahead of us, and he is not yet on the level of his neurotypical peers, but he improves literally every day in a seamless way. Yes, we do ‘work’ every day, but it is so fun and he loves it and asks for more.”

HANDLE was developed by Judith Bluestone, who was born in Chicago in 1944 and suffered from multiple neurodevelopmental issues. You can read the story of >>

Picture of happiness: Henry, one of the therapy's success stories

PORTRAIT COURTESY OF HENRY'S MUM, PENNY

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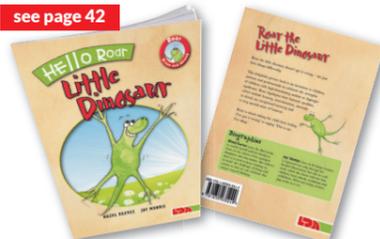
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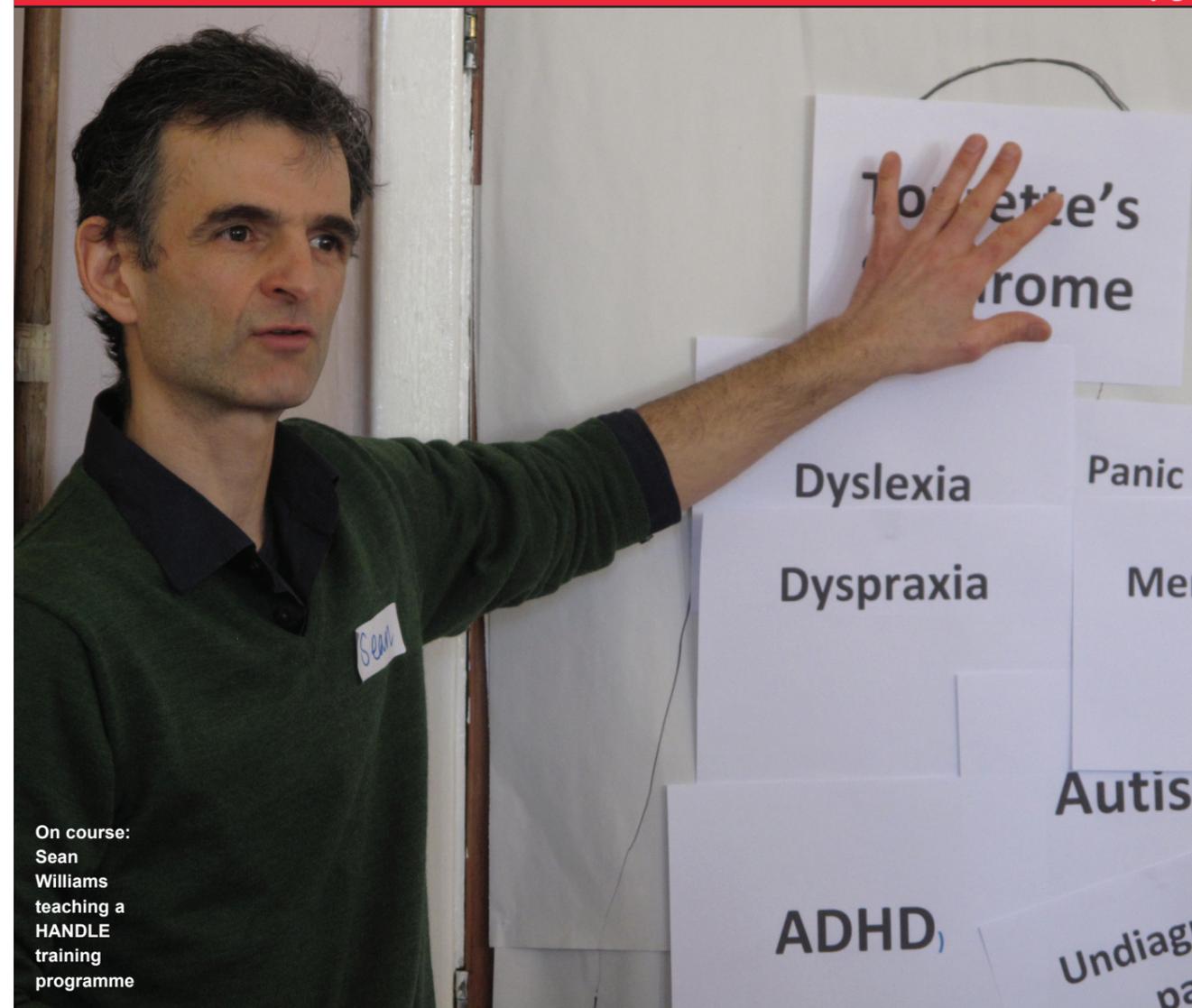
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Therapy



On course:  
Sean Williams teaching a HANDLE training programme

### Training opportunities

HANDLE instructors provide training in the therapy for parents, individuals with specific concerns and professionals via seminars and workshops.

Several training programmes are available. **Level 1 Introductory** is a one-day course open to anyone, exploring the principles and foundations of the HANDLE approach. Five HANDLE activities are taught on the course that can be adapted for use by people of all ages and abilities.

**Level 2 Basics** is a two-day course that allows exploration and experience of the systems that underpin our learning and behaviour, and introduces a further six HANDLE activities.

Training courses take place across the world. In the UK, Sean Williams is teaching a Level 1 and 2 combined weekend on 4-6 October in Brighton, Sussex, beginning with a free presentation on the Friday evening.

Levels 3 and 4 are longer courses that take participants by application only, training them to become certified HANDLE screeners and practitioners.

More information about these courses can be found at [www.handle.org](http://www.handle.org)

her childhood and many of her insightful ideas in her book, *The Fabric of Autism*. Judith was tireless in finding ways to overcome her own difficulties and went on to study human development, neuropsychology and education in order to help others do the same. In 1994 she was persuaded to form the HANDLE Institute to train others to "help extraordinary people do ordinary things". You can now find certified HANDLE providers all over the world.

Over at our clinic in Manchester, seven-year-old Henry's face lit up when he spotted the giant bean bags at the end of the room. His HANDLE assessment moved between table activities and taking turns to launch ourselves into the bean bags. The sensation of falling and feeling his body as it thumped down helped him stay focused and calm. Henry's game was giving me

information about his development.

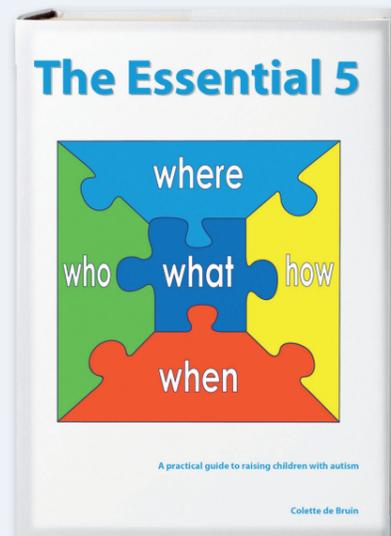
At its core, HANDLE is a way of seeing. It teaches us that 'people show us what they need' and that our behaviours are the key to understanding the state of our underlying neurological systems. Using observation, assessment and questions, a practitioner creates a neurodevelopmental profile for each client.

### Remaining challenges

Henry's mum, Penny, says: "We began HANDLE for our son to help him with his remaining challenges. To name a few, Henry's spontaneous speech was visibly hard for him, he was very restricted with his diet, unable to sit still, very reluctant to write and found it difficult to keep himself regulated and had frequent meltdowns."

Henry's profile showed that some of the systems that develop early in life were not functioning

PORTRAIT COURTESY OF SEAN WILLIAMS



### The Essential 5

A practical guide to raising children with autism.

ISBN/EAN: 9789491337017  
Author: Colette de Bruin

Colette's hands-on approach has already won many hearts. The Dutch version of The Essential 5 is well-known among parents and educators dealing with autistic children.

In 'The Essential 5' you will find HOW to raise and guide a child with autism. It is written with a view to parents and carers. A child with autism needs clarity and predictability. They are reaching out for help and the parent/carer needs to take his hand and show them WHAT they have to do, HOW they have to do it, WHERE it takes place, WHEN it needs to be done and WHO is involved. These are the 5 keywords of The Essential 5 method.

You familiarize yourself with this method while reading and this way the consequences of the disorder are explained. This is what the author calls 'putting on your anti-specs'. By wearing these 'anti-specs' you realise HOW your child's mind works.

The Essential 5 is available at Amazon.co.uk and many major online and offline bookstores and retailers.

www.the-essential-5.com  
twitter: @theessential5



## Specialist support for people with autism



# iMap

iMap provides high quality services for people who have complex needs arising from autism. iMap offers:-

- School placements (residential and day pupils)
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*'The education is centred around the children and young people, the staff are excellent and the location is idyllic'*  
-Parent of a young person placed at iMap.

iMap Centre, Forest Road, Cuddington,  
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01606 301 514  
enquiries@imapcentre.co.uk

### Come and see us at..

Kidz in the Middle and West Midlands  
Autism events on 21st March 2013.

The Autism Show in Manchester on  
28th and 29th June 2013.

### Further reading



HANDLE developer Judith Bluestone wrote two books. The first is *The Churkendoose Anthology: True Stories of Triumph over Neurological Dysfunction: Insights into the Holistic Approach to NeuroDevelopment and Learning Efficiency (HANDLE)*. In this publication Bluestone relates true stories of triumph over neurological dysfunction.



The second book is *The Fabric of Autism: Weaving the Threads into a Cogent Theory*. Here, Bluestone describes HANDLE's diagnostic and therapeutic practices in more depth.

efficiently. For example, he was hypersensitive to touch, which caused him to be very particular about what he would eat.

Our senses of smell, touch, proprioception, balance and movement are the building blocks for our successful learning of complex tasks such as social, academic and behavioural skills. Using HANDLE activities to support these foundational systems made it easier for Henry to read and write at school, to take fewer breaks and reduce the need to move around.

Penny says: "Since we began HANDLE, Henry has become noticeably more calm and grounded and able to self-regulate, and his speech has improved in terms of fluency. Six weeks after starting HANDLE Henry ate a chicken nugget, something we had been working on for about five years. We've been able to work on many goals and through periods of high anxiety for Henry."

One of the things that sets HANDLE apart from other approaches is the recognition that stressed systems do not learn or develop efficiently. We practise 'Gentle Enhancement' by stopping activities immediately in response to subtle signals of stress, such as changes in breathing, dizziness, or just wanting to stop. Understanding the simple idea that 'less is more' can prove life-changing for HANDLE clients, their families and the people who work with them. This was particularly important for Henry when his HANDLE activities were integrated into his school day. We focused on pausing during and after activities to allow



**Progress:**  
Henry made improvements within six weeks

**"I started to look with different eyes, understand more of the underlying issues and learn how to interpret behaviours"**

him time to process them, rather than rushing to get things done in the busy classroom environment.

Another client, Igor, had been a kindergarten teacher. His experience of overwhelming anxiety and perseverative behaviours (repeating something insistently or redundantly) had led to him being diagnosed with autism and he was living at home with his parents. Igor wanted to have a fuller social life and more independence. He also wanted to improve his ability to concentrate and after a year of HANDLE he decided to retrain as a librarian.

Igor's programme focused on integrating the two hemispheres of the brain and enabled him to develop more self-awareness and confidence. His activities helped

him to stay calm and in control of his thoughts through the stresses of exams, a new job and a new environment. He excelled in his exams and was offered a job in the library where he did his placement. He sends me pictures of his travels with friends and has a happy and full life. He still lives with his parents, but he helps them rather than being dependent on them.

Alex's mum, Joanna, says: "Thanks to HANDLE I started to look at my child with different eyes, understand more of the underlying issues and learn how to interpret behaviours to address these issues." The impact this kind of understanding can have on an individual's development continues to amaze me. Sharing this perspective with clients and their families fills me with optimism for how we can all access the potential that is deep inside us.

#### LINKS

For research studies on the effectiveness of the HANDLE programme and a list of providers, see the HANDLE Institute's website: [www.handle.org](http://www.handle.org)  
Find out more about Sean Williams's work as a HANDLE practitioner and instructor at [www.seanwilliams.co.uk](http://www.seanwilliams.co.uk)