

Using the Serve and Return Strategy



Responsive, attentive adults can support healthy brain development in young children through back and forth exchanges. Follow the 5 steps below to practice “serve and return” interactions.

1. Notice the child’s serve and share their focus of attention.

Pay attention to cues of a child’s serve. Some examples of these signals include a child moving their arms and legs, pointing, looking at something, and making sounds or facial expressions. Being attentive encourages young children to explore while strengthening the bond between them and their caregivers.

2. Return the child’s serve by acknowledging it and encouraging them.

Offer kind, gentle words and comfort as you engage with the child’s serve. You can tell them, “I see!” or make sounds and facial expressions as a return. If a child is pointing to safe object, pick it up and bring it toward them. Returning a child’s serve lets them know that they are heard and understood.

3. Name it!

Return the serve by naming what the child is doing, seeing, or feeling. This builds language connections in their brain, even before they can talk or understand your words. If a child is touching your face, say, “Yes, that is my face!”

4. Keep the interaction going by taking turns and waiting for the child’s response.

Give the child time to respond each time you return their serve. Waiting is an important part of back and forth exchanges. Children often need time to form responses, and waiting helps keep the turn-taking going. Taking turns and building in wait time helps children learn self-control, builds their confidence, and gives adults time to understand their needs.

5. Pay attention to beginnings and endings.

Children will signal when they are done or ready to move on. They might let go of what they’re holding, pick up something new, or look at something else. Or they may move away, become fussy, or signal “All done!” Sharing the child’s focus will help you know when they’re ready to end the activity and begin a new one.

Adapted from:

Center on the Developing Child. (2019, May 15). *5 steps for brain-building serve and return* [Video file].

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>