

Serve and Return: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

How you interact with children shapes their development



Did you know that building a child’s developing brain can be as simple as playing a game of peek-a-boo?

Genes provide the basic blueprint, but brain architecture is shaped by the experiences children have with you and the other adults who care for them. Child-adult relationships that are responsive and attentive—with lots of what we call “serve and return” interactions—build a strong foundation in a child’s brain for all future learning and development. These interactions are also the building blocks for the skills that children need in order to handle life’s challenges. All of this means that how you interact with children *now* will have lifelong effects on their physical and mental health, education, and behavior.

Like tennis, volleyball, or any game where a ball is passed back and forth, serve and return takes two to play! When a young child says something (or a baby babbles or coos), looks at something, or does something and an adult responds with eye contact, words, or actions, that’s serve and return. New science shows that these interactions are the key ingredient to making crucial connections in the brain.

Serve and return interactions can happen anytime, anywhere, at any age—starting soon after birth—and should happen many, many times each day. The examples on the next page describe interaction with babies and toddlers, but serve and return is something we can do throughout life!

5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return

From Filming Interactions to Nurture Development (FIND)



1

Notice the serve and share the child's focus of attention. Is the child looking or pointing at something? Making a sound or facial expression? Moving her arms and legs or tensing and relaxing her muscles? That's a serve.

The key is to pay attention to what the child is focused on. Of course, you can't spend all your time doing this, so look for small opportunities throughout the day—like while you're getting him dressed or waiting in line at the store.

WHY? By noticing serves, you'll learn a lot about a child's abilities, interests, and needs. You'll encourage her to explore the world around her. And strengthen the bond between you.

FIND calls Step 1: Sharing Your Child's Focus



2

Return the serve by supporting and encouraging. You can do this in many ways—by comforting with a hug and gentle words, providing something the child wants or needs, helping, playing, and acknowledging. For example, you could make a sound or facial expression—like saying, "I see!" or smiling and nodding to let him know you are noticing the same thing. Or you can pick up the object he's pointing to and give it to him.

WHY? By supporting and encouraging the child, you reward his interests and curiosity. In fact, never getting a return can be stressful for a child. When you return the serve, the child knows that his thoughts and feelings are heard and understood.

FIND calls Step 2: Supporting & Encouraging



3

Name it! When you return a child's serve by naming what she is seeing, doing, or feeling, you make important connections about language in her brain, even before she can talk or understand your words.

You can name anything—a person, a thing, an action, a thought, a feeling, or a combination. For example, a child may point to her feet, and you point to them, too, and say, "Yes, those are your feet!"

WHY? When you name what a child is focused on, you give her a map for exploring her world and help her know what to expect. Naming also helps children develop communication skills. Most importantly, naming lets her know that you care for her.

FIND calls Step 3: Naming



4

Take turns... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth. Every time you return a serve, give the child a chance to respond. The more often you return a serve, the more likely he is to keep the interaction going. Taking turns can be quick (from the child to you and back again) or go on for many turns. Waiting is crucial. Children need time to form their ideas or responses, especially when they're very young and learning so many things at once. Waiting and giving the child time to respond helps keep the turns going.

WHY? Taking turns helps children learn self-control and how to get along with others. By waiting, you give the child a chance to explore and develop his own ideas and build his confidence and independence. Waiting also lets you understand his needs.

FIND calls Step 4: Back and Forth



5

Practice endings & beginnings.

Children signal when they're done or ready to move on to a new activity. They might let go of a toy, pick up a new one, or turn to look at something else. Or they may walk away, start to fuss, or say, "All done!" When you share a child's focus, you'll notice when she's ready to end the activity and begin something new.

Now, as the adult, you have choices: You can join the child as she switches her focus. Or, you can stop the back and forth interaction because you need to do something else. In that case, try to gently redirect her attention to an independent activity and be clear about what will happen next.

WHY? Adult-led endings & beginnings happen all the time and are often necessary, but when you can find moments for a child to take the lead, you help her grow. She feels supported and learns to manage transitions more easily.

FIND calls Step 5: Endings & Beginnings

Serve and return interactions make everyday moments fun and become second nature with practice. *By taking small moments during the day to do serve and return with a child, you strengthen the foundation for that child's lifelong learning, behavior, and physical and mental health—and help build the child's skills for facing life's challenges.*

For more on serve and return:
tinyurl.com/serve-return

Filming Interactions to Nurture Development (FIND) is a video coaching program that aims to strengthen positive interactions between caregivers and children. FIND was developed by Dr. Phil Fisher and colleagues in Eugene, Oregon.

For more about FIND:
tinyurl.com/find-program