



Help Your Baby Learn and Grow with “Serve and Return” Interaction

Imagine a game of tennis, ping pong or pickleball. One player serves the ball, and the other returns the ball. This is called “serve and return.” Many experts also call the back-and-forth interactions between a baby and their caregiver “serve and return.” According to researchers, these interactions are important. They shape the structure of the baby’s brain in ways that build communication and social skills.



Everyday routines are full of ways to serve and return! Here are five tips:

1. **Share the focus:** When you see that your child is curious or interested in something, it means that they are “serving.” Respond or “return” by bringing the item closer to them, talking about the item, or joining in their excitement.
2. **Support and encourage:** If you notice your child showing interest in something, return the interest. Use words like “thank you,” “wow” or “I like that, too,” or show excitement on your face. Your attention helps your child know that they are being heard and understood.
3. **Name it:** If your child shows interest in a person, item, feeling or action, name it. Naming things builds your child’s ability to use words and to understand the world around them. If your child points to an apple, you might say, “That apple sure looks yummy!”
4. **Take turns:** Show your child how to take turns back and forth playing and talking back and forth. If your child rolls a ball to you, pause. Then roll it back. If you ask your child a question, pause and wait for the answer. When they serve again, return again. Taking turns teaches your child self-control and how to get along with others.
5. **Practice endings and beginnings:** When you notice that your child is finished with one toy or activity and moves to another, follow their lead. Allowing your child to end and start supports them in exploring their world.

Babies and children are naturally curious. They are eager to learn about the world around them. Watch closely and you will start to notice the different ways they try to attract your attention or “serve.” Return their serve and you will be helping their brains grow. You will also enjoy fun, playful moments together.

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