

TINY BITS (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER) FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
AUGUST 2021 TINY BIT

SERVE AND RETURN- FIVE STEPS FOR BRAIN BUILDING

Child-adult relationships that are responsive and attentive, with lots of back-and-forth interactions, build a strong foundation in a child's brain for all future learning and development. This is called "serve and return," and it takes two to play! Make everyday moments fun! Take small moments during the day to do serve and return and you will build up the foundation for children's lifelong learning, behavior, and health and their skills for facing life's challenges.

Follow these 5 steps to practice serve and return with your child.

1. **Notice the serve and share your child's focus of attention.** Is your child looking or pointing at something? Making a sound or facial expression? That's a serve. The key is to pay attention to what your child is focused on. Look for small opportunities throughout the day—like while you are getting them dressed or waiting in line at the store. **WHY?** By noticing serves, you will learn a lot about children's abilities, interests, and needs. Encourage them to explore and you will strengthen the bond between you.
2. **Return the serve by supporting and encouraging.** You can offer your child comfort with a hug and gentle words, help them, play with them, or acknowledge them. You can make a sound or facial expression— like saying, "I see!" or smiling and nodding to let a child know you are noticing the same thing. You can pick up an object a child is pointing to and bring it closer. **WHY?** Supporting and encouraging rewards a child's interests and curiosity. Never getting a return can be stressful for a child. When you return a serve, children know that their thoughts and feelings are heard and understood.
3. **Give it a Name!** When you return a serve by naming what your child is seeing, doing, or feeling, you make important language connections in their brain, even before your child can talk or understand your words. You can name anything, a person, a thing, an action, a feeling, or a combination. If a child points to their feet, you can also point to them and say, "Yes, those are your feet!" **WHY?** When you name what children are focused on, you help them understand the world around them and know what to expect. Naming also gives children words to use and lets them know you care.
4. **Take turns and wait.** Keep the interaction going back and forth. Every time you return a serve, give your child a chance to respond. Taking turns can be quick (from the child to you and back again) or go on for many turns. Be patient, waiting is key! Children need time to form their responses, especially when they are learning so many things at once. Waiting helps keep the turns going. **WHY?** Taking turns helps children learn self-control and how to get along with others. By waiting, you give children time to develop their own ideas and build their confidence and independence. Waiting also helps you understand their needs.
5. **Practice endings and beginnings.** Children signal when they are 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. They may say "All done!" When you share your child's focus, you will notice when they are ready to end the activity and begin something new. **WHY?** When you can find moments for children to take the lead, you support them in exploring their world.

Excerpted from: [5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return - Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#)

