

How Are the Children? The Children Are Well!

**Serve-and-return—
reading and
'conversing'
with babies
teach language,
communication,
social skills, and
self-esteem.**



Have you ever played an enjoyable game of ball toss or ping-pong where one partner serves and another returns the serve? Early language is like a game with serves and returns. Imagine you played with a partner who looked at his/her phone when you served, or, you played with a partner who insisted you keep playing after you lost interest? The game would break down and the opportunities for fun, relationship building, and exercise would be lost.

The back-and-forth of reciprocal interactions, called “**serve-and-return**”, shape babies’ brains. When a child babbles, gestures, smiles, or cries and an adult responds with recognition and interest, brain connections are built and strengthened—connections that support **language, communication, social skills, and self-esteem**. How does this happen?

When a baby starts an interaction and an adult responds, “mirror” nerve cells are created in the brain. These “mirrors” help the baby predict their world and tell them they are safe. They also signal messages to the baby like, **You are delightful, smart and interesting!** and **Tell me more!** and **You are safe with me!**

These simple back-and forth interactions strengthen relationships with parents, family members, childcare providers, and other important people in the baby’s world. **These everyday interactions set the stage for life.**

Every baby and adult have their own rhythm for serve-and-return. Children as young as three months can anticipate the “conversation” they’ll have with the important adults in their lives. Some partners are gentle and inviting, leaning in and talking in a soft, encouraging way when returning serves. Others are playful and energizing, touching or tickling, or using an animated voice.

The important thing is that the partners are in sync. They watch the other and learn the signals that keep the communication going. Babies learn that “your turn, my turn” will extend the game. They learn how to engage their partner and how to bring out a return. These exchanges also help babies lengthen their attention spans and develop creative variations to familiar “conversations”.

Returning to the idea of mirror nerve cells, when the baby (or any partner) initiates a serve and it is not returned, the brain might reinforce messages the adults don’t intentionally mean to send, but are sent all the same, **Your needs are not going to be met!** or **You’re too much for me! What’s wrong with you?**

Serve-and-return can break down for many reasons:

- Postpartum depression and feelings of isolation may interfere with a mother's ability to respond to her baby—this affects 10-20% of mothers in their child's first year.
- Family stress over money, resources, time demands, and lack of support can draw parents' attention away from a baby, especially if the child is not demanding interaction.
- Some adults believe that if babies don't "understand" language, they don't need to hear it.
- Fussy babies may be harder to engage and not as rewarding to play with as cheerful ones.
- A breakdown in serve-and-return does not mean the adults don't love the baby. Life can be overwhelming sometimes.

Serve-and-return, happens whether we plan it or not, in the messages we send and the patterns we create. We know that with attention, **serve-and-return interactions can support healthy development for a lifetime**. And, we can change old patterns by focusing on simple steps.

The Harvard Center for the Developing Child suggests **5 Steps** for building serves-and-returns:

- **Share the focus.** When children point, vocalize, or gesture and we notice, we help build curiosity and the shared attention that allows deeper learning to occur.
- **Encourage turn taking** with a word, smile or gesture. You show that you understand and care.
- **Name what you think the child sees, hears, and feels** even before they know the meaning of the words. Babies first learn language and reading skills by hearing words spoken to them or read to them slowly from stories. This helps build understanding of the world and adds predictability for the baby.
- **Take turns.** Wait for the child to respond to you after you return a serve and teach that relationships are two-way exchanges. This also helps build self-control and independence.
- **Practice endings and beginnings.** Children signal when they've had enough and are ready to begin something new. By recognizing endings, we can allow for new beginnings.

Resources for you:

- Go to Healthy Peninsula at healthypeninsula.org or the Peninsula Birth to 5 Facebook page for the **Family Resource Guide** and the **Early Childhood Newsletter** with local activities and resources.
- **Libraries often offer story times** for babies and young children. Take advantage of these programs on Zoom or as libraries are able to safely reopen.
- Maine Families Free home visiting program for all families that offers child development information, activities, and support for parents. mainefamilies.org 207/667-5304 (ext 225)
- Community Compass Navigator program links area parents to early childhood development resources and parenting support. communitycompassdowneast.org 207/522-7983

Here's a website with a **short video** that shows serve-and-return in action.

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

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