5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return

from Filming Interactions to Nurture Development (FIND)

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

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, you build up the foundation for children's lifelong learning, behavior, and health—and their 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

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? That's a serve. The key is to pay attention to what the child is focused on. 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 and you'll strengthen the bond between you.*

2 Return the serve by supporting and encouraging.

You can offer comfort with a hug and gentle words, help him, play with him, or acknowledge him. You can make a sound or facial expression—like saying, "I see!" or smiling and nodding to let him know you're noticing the same thing. Or you can pick up the object he's pointing to and give it to him.

WHY? *Supporting and encouraging rewards a child's interests and curiosity. Never getting a return can actually be stressful for a child. When you return the serve, the child knows that his thoughts and feelings are heard and understood.*

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

3

Give it a name!

When you return a child's serve by naming what she is seeing, doing, or feeling, you make important language connections in her brain, even before she 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 her feet, you can also point to them and say, "Yes, those are your feet!"

WHY? *When you name what a child is focused on, you help her understand the world around her and help her know what to expect. Naming also gives her words to use herself and lets her know you care.*

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. 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 responses, especially when they're 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 the child time to develop his ideas and build his confidence and independence. Waiting also helps you understand his needs.*

5

Practice endings and 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.

WHY? *When you can find moments for a child to take the lead, you support her in exploring her world—and make more serve and return interactions possible.*

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