



Serve and Return: The Secret to Strong Brain Architecture

A Resource for Families



Babies are born with billions of neurons, waiting to connect! Connections are formed, shaped, and strengthened when you engage in “**serve and return**”, back and forth interactions with your child, taking turns in a conversation.

The more interactions you have with your baby, the more language he will learn and the better prepared he will be for all learning, including learning to read later on.



Here are some examples of “serves” to look for from you infant or toddler and how you can “return” these serves.

You don’t have to wait for your baby to “serve” to start a conversation!

Serve and Return with Babies 0-6 months old

How your baby serves ...	How you can return your baby’s serve ...
Gazes at you, makes eye contact	Look at the baby’s face and smile and talk with him about everything going on around him!
Cries	Talk with the baby about how he might be feeling, e.g., “ <i>Are you hungry? Let’s get your bottle ready ... Hey there, little one, why are you so upset?</i> ”
Kicks and waves his arms	Describe to the baby what he’s doing, e.g., “ <i>I see you kicking your legs ..., you kick your legs really hard ...</i> ”
Coos and gurgles	Talk back! Talk about the baby, talk about you, tell him your thoughts and feelings! Use a loving voice and lots of facial expressions!
Attends to your voice	Tell the baby how sweet, smart, adorable, and loved he is!
Looks at people, sights, and sounds that interest him	Tune in to his interests, talk about what he’s looking at or appears to be paying attention to.
Coos and gurgles making different vowel sounds	Imitate the sounds and wait for the baby’s response.
Smiles when you talk	Sing, talk, and read books with your baby!

Serve and Return with Babies 6-12 months old

How your baby serves	How you can return your baby’s serve
Looks at objects, pictures, books and points to them	Talk about what he’s interested in, describe pictures you see in the book.
Reaches for things	Name what he’s reaching for, e.g., “ <i>Do you want the teddy bear?</i> ”
Babbles using many different	Have a conversation! Expand on what you hear, e.g., baby says “ba ba”,



consonant sounds, e.g., ba ba	and you might say, <i>“That is a big blue ball you have!”</i>
Uses simple gestures, e.g., waves bye-bye, shakes head “no”	Follow his lead and respond. Wave and say bye back.
Uses sounds as if they were words	Give meaning to the baby’s words and respond, e.g., <i>“Yes, it’s really cold in here, isn’t it?”</i>
Says 1-2 words (around first birthday)	Respond – look at him and talk about what he did, e.g., <i>“Where did the block go? It’s in the bucket. You put it in the bucket!”</i>

Serve and Return with Toddlers 12- 18 months old	
How your toddler serves	How you can return your toddler’s serve
Uses words and gestures	Expand what he says, using a more complete sentence.
Points to things that interest her	Give meaning and respond, e.g., <i>“Yes, the bird is really high up on the tree, isn’t it?”</i>
Brings a book for you to read	Take a moment, sit down, and read the book together, making comments about what you see on each page!
Names familiar objects	Talk about what the object feels or looks like.

Serve and Return with Toddlers 18- 24 months old	
How your toddler serves	How you can return your toddler’s serve
Uses more words and 2-word sentences	Restate and expand what he says, using a more complete sentence and lots of new words.
Asks yes/no questions	Answer the question using lots of words, and maybe ask a related question.
Points to a picture in a book and asks, “What’s that?”	Have a conversation around the book! Use lots of words to describe what’s on the page and add gestures to act out the meaning of the word or the action shown on the page.

Serve and Return with Toddlers 24-36 months old	
How your toddler serves	How you can return your toddler’s serve
Talks in simple 2- to 3-word sentences, e.g., “Poon fall down.”	Repeat back what you think your child said in a more correct way, e.g., <i>“Your spoon fell on the floor.”</i>
Asks questions, including why	Encourage your child’s questions, introduce interesting words as you answer, using concrete examples.
Invites you to pretend play	Join in the fun, take a role, play along, and ask questions about what your child is doing, always giving her a turn in the conversation.
Repeats a phrase from a favorite book	Revisit the topic of the book and have a conversation about the story.
Uses his home language or English to communicate with you	Use the language in which you are most comfortable speaking, and can share lots of words and ideas with your child; share books, songs in your home language; support all the languages your child is learning.