



# Pathways to Success

Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

## Serve and Return

### How Positive Child/Caregiver Interactions Build Strong Brains

The structure and healthy development of a child's brain is determined by more than just their genes. The experiences we have in the first years of our lives affects the physical architecture of our brains. Our brains need consistent, positive interactions from family and caregivers. During these positive interactions we can build on the child's own unique interests, capabilities, and motivations. This helps to shape the child's self-awareness, build their minds and their hearts. One way we can do this is through what is called Serve and Return.

#### What does a serve and return interaction look like?

Serve and return works like an imaginary tennis match between a child and a caregiver. But instead of hitting a ball back and forth, various forms of communication pass between the child and caregiver. A child literally reaches out for an interaction. A responsive caregiver will "return the serve" by being a responsive partner.



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## How can you use “serve and return” with children?

### Start by:

- Observing the child to see what they are interested in.
- Wait to for the child to “serve” or start an interaction. Wait to see how they communicate with you. Do they smile? Ask a question? Make a sound? Say a word? Point to something? Tell a story? These are all ways for children to “serve”.

Let the child be the leader! “Return” the child’s “serve” by responding to what the child has shown interest in.

Let’s look at a few examples of how you can “return” a “serve.”

With babies, toddlers or early language users you could:

**Imitate** their sounds, expressions, actions, and words. Why is imitating important?

- It shows that you are paying attention to what they are doing, and they are more likely to include you in their play.
- It shows the child how to imitate. This will encourage the child to imitate you when you communicate with them.

You could also **interpret** their message.

- Have you ever spoken to a little one and not understood what they have said? Do your best to interpret their message and let them know you are listening.

With all children you can make comments and ask questions.

- Make statements about what you or your child is doing. Comment about what you are experiencing.
- When asking questions, yes/no preference questions and choice questions are the easiest to answer. What, where, who, when and why questions keep the conversation going.
- It’s not a test! Use at least two comments for every one question. For example, instead of saying “Is that a house?” Say, “You made a house!” Instead of saying “Do you like your strawberries?” Say “You have juicy strawberries!”

These back and forth interactions should continue for many turns for each person involved. Keep the serve and return going, as these interactions are key to the development of a young child’s brain and in the ongoing development of a child’s brain throughout their life.

*Source: Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Retrieved from [albertafamilywellness.org](http://albertafamilywellness.org)*