AT A GLANCE



Serve and Return

Learn how serve and return interactions support young children's healthy development—and how we can create environments rich in responsive relationships that support kids and caregivers alike.

Science Snapshot: What We Know

Serve and return interactions are responsive, back-and-forth exchanges between a young child and a caring adult—much like a lively game of tennis. These simple interactions are critical for a child's healthy development, and they can occur during everyday moments, from diaper changes to bedtime routines. For example, when an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, an adult might respond with eye contact, words, or a hug.

The brain is wired to expect this game of back and forth. **Serve and return interactions help build a strong foundation for a child's brain architecture and for all future learning, health, and well-being:**

- Serve and return interactions help to build and strengthen neural connections in the brain that are essential for the development of communication and social skills.[1]
- These early skills serve as a foundation for more complex, high-level cognitive abilities that form later in life. For example, naming what a young child is seeing, doing, or feeling helps make important language connections—even before they can talk or understand words.
- Responsive relationships can also help buffer against sources of stress, promoting children's resilience and healthy development.[2]
- And serve and return interactions can reinforce a sense of mattering—the feeling that we are valued and have value to add to the world—for both the child and caregiver. These exchanges spark the release of chemical signals of reward and pleasure, such as dopamine and serotonin—offering emotional reassurance and physiological benefits.[3]

Conversely, the absence of responsive relationships can have harmful effects on a child's development and well-being:

When an adult's responses to a child are inconsistent, harmful, or simply absent, toxic stress can result. This type of stress can disrupt the development of healthy brain architecture and biological systems more broadly, with impacts on learning, health, and well-being across the lifespan.[4]

There are many reasons why a caregiver might not engage in consistent serve and return interactions with young children. Significant stress brought on by financial challenges, a lack of social connections, or chronic health issues can make it more difficult to provide responsive care. This underscores the need for solutions—such as the policy approaches below—that support caregivers' well-being.

Solutions Snapshot: What We Can Do

Policies and programs that reduce stressors and support adult caregivers can strengthen their capabilities and capacity for providing consistent, responsive caregiving.

Policymakers and community leaders can take a variety of approaches, including:

- **Strengthen economic support:** Policies and programs that boost families' financial stability—like expanded child tax credits and cash prescription programs—can help reduce caregiver stress, supporting their ability to engage in consistent serve and return interactions.
- **Promote safe, stable housing:** Reducing evictions and boosting housing availability for families can help ensure a safe, healthy, and consistent place to live—and increase the capacity for caregivers to engage in responsive interactions.
- **Expand access to paid parental leave:** Paid family leave policies can ease caregiver stress and ensure relationship stability in the critical months after birth.
- **Build an ecosystem of mattering:** Adults who feel they matter are more likely to offer attuned, responsive care. Leaders can promote a sense of mattering across children's and caregivers' environments, from the workplace (such as recognizing employees' impact and involving them in decisions) to public spaces (such as investing in a neighborhood park).



Discover simple steps for practicing serve and return in everyday moments with children.

Learn more and discover ways to support responsive caregiving with our Resource Guide on Serve and Return, featuring working papers, videos, and more.

For a complete list of references, please see below.