

# Serve and Return:

Simple Ways to Support Your Baby's Development



# Understanding Serve and Return

Serve and Return is a simple, powerful way to support your child's brain development. Just like in a game of tennis or catch – when your child does something to get your attention, and you respond warmly, their brain grows stronger.

## The "Serve"

Your child gets your attention – by looking at something, pointing, babbling, smiling, or saying a word.

## The "Return"

You notice what they did and respond in a warm, meaningful way – completing the exchange.

## Everyday Examples of Serve and Return

Child's Action (Serve)	Your Response (Return)
Baby points to a dog	"That's a dog! He says 'woof woof!'"
Toddler babbles at toy	"You found the red truck! It goes vroom!"
Preschooler says "Look!"	"Wow, I see it! That's a big bug crawling on the leaf!"
Baby makes a silly face	You smile back and say, "You're so silly!"
Child brings you a toy	"Thank you for sharing! Should we play together?"

# Why It Matters



## Strong Brain Connections

Back-and-forth moments build the neural pathways that support lifelong learning.



## Language & Social Skills

Builds the language and social-emotional skills your child needs to thrive.



## Feeling Safe & Valued

Helps your child feel seen, safe, and deeply valued by you.



## Better Thinkers

Becomes a stronger communicator, thinker, and problem-solver over time.

# 5 Easy Steps to Practice Serve and Return



## Notice the Serve

Watch for looks, gestures, sounds, or words.



## Return the Serve

Respond with interest: smile, talk, point, or copy their sounds.



## Name Their Focus

Help them make sense of their world by naming what they're interested in.



## Keep It Going

Ask questions or take turns to extend the interaction.



## End When They're Done

Look for signs they're ready to stop or move on – and follow their lead.

# A Real-Life Moment: Diaper Change

You don't need fancy toys or a lot of time. Everyday moments — diaper changes, walks, mealtime, or car rides — are perfect for Serve and Return. The key is to be **present, curious, and responsive**.



## Make Eye Contact

Smile warmly and make eye contact while you care for your baby.



## Repeat Their Sounds

Mirror their coo or babble back: "Ohh, you said 'ahhh!' I hear you!"



## Narrate the Moment

"I'm cleaning you up now... fresh diaper coming! There we go — nice and clean!"



## Use a Warm Tone

A soothing or playful tone helps your baby feel calm, connected, and safe.



## Watch for All Serves

Babies also serve with their eyes, facial expressions, or wiggles — notice and respond!

**i** Even though your baby may not use words yet, their brain is making important connections that support **language, trust, and learning** — all during an everyday task.

# We're Here for You!

- At **Ollie**, we believe that everyday moments can be powerful. Keep connecting, serving, and returning – and watch your child thrive. If you need more ideas or support, reach out to your **Ollie Team!**

## References

- References: American Psychological Association (APA), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Zero to Three, HealthySteps.