INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Serve & Return

Serve & Return. Science shows "Serve & Return" is the most important thing parents can do to help their child's language development*. Keep serving and returning little communications with your child: back-and-forth, back-and-forth, just like a great rally in tennis.

What is Serve & Return?

It's those moments when your child **"serves"** up a little communication to you. Maybe they look, babble, move, point, or talk. Then you **"return"** your child's **"serve"** by responding with eye contact, attention, a laugh, a word or sentence, a point, movement, gesture or facial expression.

In **Serve & Return** you try to keep the interaction going back-and-forth like a tennis rally. You have a conversational turn. Your child has a conversational turn, then you, then your child, and so on.

It really is just like tennis. In tennis, a player has to adjust themselves to meet a ball that has a unique spin, speed and direction that is not exactly like any other ball they've ever hit! In interaction you have to tune-in, observe, adjust, and respond in unique ways that keep the interaction (or rally) going between you and your child.

"Serve & Return" gives your child attentive conversational experiences.

The science of language development shows that giving **conversational experience** is the most powerful thing you can do to build your child's language. Conversational turn-taking, over and over again - "Serve & Return" – is the most excellent conversational experience you can give. And be kind, "Serve & Return" has the greatest power when our emotions are positive!

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Baby

For a baby "Serve & Return" might go like this: *Baby pulls a face. You copy it and make a sound. Baby looks at you. You pull a new face. Baby makes a sound. You copy it and add another sound. Baby looks surprised. You laugh and hug baby.* That's lots of conversational turns!

Toddler

For a toddler "Serve & Return" might go like this: *Toddler gets cross. You use a soothing voice. Toddler looks at you. You smile and say "ah". Toddler looks at you with a grumpy face. You smile again. Toddler folds arm and looks cross. You smile and fold your arms. Toddler smiles. You laugh and hold out your arms. Toddler comes to you.*
That's lots of conversational turns. Remember it's the **turns** that matter!

Children

For a child who has some words "Serve & Return" might go like this: *Child says 'no'. You smile and say 'ok'. Child looks surprised. You say 'you are surprised'. Child says 'no' again. You smile and say 'I don't mind'. Child smiles. You say 'let's do it together'. Child says 'no'. You say 'ok, when you're ready'. Child looks surprised. You say 'I can wait for you'.*
That's lots of conversational turns!

For a child who has lots of words already "Serve & Return" might go like this: *Flat-out conversation* - and you keep the conversation going for lots of conversational turns!

Slow down. Enjoy the moments. Noticing what your child does and seeking connection are the keys. Then keep up the conversational turns.

Conversational turns with a parent is the most important thing for language development, rather than the sheer amount of language a child hears*.

The "Serve & Return" experiences that you give your child contribute to brain development and language growth*.

*Golinkoff, R. M., Hoff, E., Rowe, M.L., Tamis-LeMonda, C.L., Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2019). Language Matters: Denying the Existence of the 30-Million-Word Gap Has Serious Consequences, *Child Development,* 90(3): 985–992. doi:10.1111/cdev.13128.

*Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2018). Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children's Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function. *Psychological Science,* 29(5), 700–710. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617742725.