



# An introduction to serve and return in early childhood education



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Responsive interactions have been identified as a vital element in supporting all children to thrive. Serve and return describes what we see and do in the back and forth of these responsive interactions. Serve and return interactions are critical for all children, but they are particularly important for infants and toddlers in the first two years. It seems intuitive that playing with infants, responding to them and building relationships matters, but the benefit of focusing in on a specific approach like serve and return is that it can help teachers and caregivers to take concrete action and notice things that make a significant difference to the lifelong wellbeing of children. This guide sets out:

- A short introduction to serve and return – what it is and why it matters
- The challenges of serve and return
- How to increase the quantity and quality of serve and return interactions with infants and toddlers

## What is serve and return and why does it matter?

Serve and return is a short-hand term coined by researchers at [Harvard University](https://www.harvard.edu/) in 2005. It synthesises a number of complex ideas around the love and nurturing of infants and helps make those ideas more accessible and practically useful in everyday settings by using the image of a rally in a tennis match or game of ping-pong. Serve and return is the focused, back and forth, two-way interaction between an infant and an adult when both the infant and adult are trying to communicate, to understand each other, to relate, and to show care and interest.

Serve and return uses the image of a tennis rally to make it clear that the infant is an equal partner with agency, feelings and ideas of their own: infants serve as well as return. Serve and return requires adults to act in a relational way that recognises the mana of children and genuinely 'see' and get to know the infant in order for rallies to grow and develop. The activity itself doesn't really matter – what matters most is the relational intention, the common interest, and the 'rally space' of mutual back and forth. While words or sounds are often involved, a lot of serve and return is non-verbal. Infants and adults don't only 'serve' (or return) words and sounds: tone, touch, feeling, gestures, eye-contact, smiles, squirming, reaching, swaying and patting are all part of what can be served to and received back from an infant. Serve and return is two way – the adult is physically and emotionally affected during the process and so is the infant. When an adult is connected with an infant in the rhythm of a mutually engaged rally, the infant and the adult are co-regulating and often sharing heart beats, hormones, emotions, and breathing patterns.

Serve and return interactions are important for all children, but especially critical for infants. The value of serve and return interactions in the first 1000 days cannot be over-stated. Infants are born wanting and expecting to connect and, from the very start, they seek out connection with the people around them. Getting a caring and attuned response often enough from the adults around them is essential for all aspects of their holistic development. A wealth of neuroscientific research produced since the 1990s has confirmed that the loving, in-tune, back and forth serve and return interactions that adults have with infants build the foundations for all later brain development, learning, and emotional, mental and physical health. Infants that receive enough love and responsive attention feel safe and soothed, and build brains

that are ready to play, explore and learn. Infants who don't receive enough love and responsive attention miss out on the positive brain building stimulation that comes from interacting with a loving and responsive adult but, much more than this, they feel unsafe and highly stressed. Their bodies are often flooded with potentially harmful stress hormones and their brains are more likely to be wired to be ready to react, defend themselves and survive. This can make it much harder for children to do many of the things we want them to be able to do later on – to make and keep friends, to accept comfort, to regulate their emotions, and to pay attention.

Serve and return interactions have additional value for children with complex and stressful lives. Relationally-focused, loving and attuned serve and return interactions are exceptionally valuable because, in addition to building strong foundations for lifelong resilience, they also help to repair the impacts of trauma and stress experienced during pregnancy, at birth or during the first few months (including the impacts of family violence, substance misuse, chronic illness, and poverty). Focusing on serve and return may be a significant contribution that teachers and caregivers can make to breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. Growing a network of adults who are focused on providing lots of high quality serve and return interactions in the lives of infants and toddlers can be a crucial harm prevention and reduction intervention to support healing and resilience, particularly within the context of external wraparound support from infant mental health professionals and other experts.

## The challenge of serve and return

Serve and return is often presented as 'just playing' with an infant, and because serve and return is a simple image, it can be easy to think 'we do all that already'. However, serve and return interactions can often be harder to do than they first appear. A significant challenge of serve and return is to ask how much, and how well, teachers and caregivers are able to engage in uninterrupted, relationally responsive rallies with infants and toddlers. There are a number of factors that are likely to impact on this.

**How adults feel matters.** Serve and return can feel tiring, draining and frustrating for adults. It needs patience, persistence and focus, and draws on executive function skills. This is because the adult needs to put lots of effort into regulating their own feelings and responses. An adult has to be sufficiently calm and regulated but also open before they can engage, connect, and help to regulate an infant or toddler. While all positive interaction supports the development of children, high quality serve and return requires an adult to be deeply interested in forming a relationship with the child, to have enough uninterrupted one-on-one time to focus in on them, to 'linger lovingly' and to notice the small things, rather than just performing tasks like reading, singing, talking, feeding and so on. This is much more than having a 'key worker' identified for each child. The quality and quantity of interactions are dependent on how the adult feels about the child with whom they are interacting and how committed they are to the child.

**The setting matters.** The environment plays an important role in supporting teachers to engage in high quality serve and return interactions. Calm, peer support, respite, respect, belonging, community and connection are all important enabling factors for teachers. By contrast, noise, distraction, administrative workload, long hours, high ratios, staff turn-over, or a negative team culture can undermine the ability of teachers to engage fully and deeply in serve and return. Even small things, like an expectation to regularly stop and take a photo or video, can break the flow and ability to extend and deepen the rally of interaction between a teacher and infant.

**Teachers' and caregivers' own histories and mental wellbeing matter.** Stress, depression, boredom, isolation, exhaustion and their own personal history all impact on their ability of any adult to give infants and toddlers the open, positive, emotionally regulated and focused care they need. An adult's own childhood experiences can have an (often unconscious) impact on the way they interact with the children

in their care. This is recognised for parents, but the same is also true for teachers. It is important to find ways to acknowledge and respond to this as part of teacher selection, training, support and day-to-day practice.

The challenges posed by serve and return can raise some difficult but important questions for early childhood teachers and caregivers to ask about the limits of what can be provided in an institutional setting to support the loving responsive care that is so important to infants. It is not necessary to have all the answers. ECE settings are only one part of a network of whānau, community and specialist providers who all play a part in creating the loving network of relationships around infants. But the more that teachers can engage in serve and return interactions and take time to grapple with the challenges it poses, the more they are likely to find ways of helping children to thrive.

## How to support more and better serve and return interactions with infants and toddlers

**Be conscious.** Serve and return is an action, and the image of a tennis rally is a simple reminder of the goal that teachers are seeking to achieve. Serve and return interactions don't have to be constant or perfect, but the more that teachers can consciously try to engage in one-on-one, uninterrupted, reciprocal interactions with infants and young toddlers the better. Because serve and return is a relational activity, adults get better with practice as they learn more about each infant and give infants time to get to know them. The aim is to find ways to start building longer and better rallies with individual infants and children. [This video](#) provides some useful ideas and tips.

**Slow down.** Serve and return is more about 'being' with an infant than 'doing' with an infant. It helps to slow down, focus in on what an infant is 'serving', and be conscious of trying to create a rally of mutual interest and emotional connection. When teachers slow down and focus in, they are more likely to notice the little things and to genuinely respond to the particular infant with whom they are interacting. It takes time and patience (for both the adult and the infant) to learn how to respond and interact. Slowing down and tuning in also helps adults to notice when an infant wants to engage and when they want to rest or be alone.

**Be curious.** To increase the quality and quantity of the responsive interactions that are happening for infants and toddlers, it can be useful for teachers as individuals and as a team to be open to seeing and noticing more about how, when and for whom serve and return occurs in their setting. Notice how much uninterrupted and focused time adults are able to spend engaging in serve and return with particular children. Consider how the environment or the norms and policies in place may be supporting or hindering serve and return interactions. It helps for teachers to pay attention to their own feelings by noticing when they feel bored, frustrated or as though they are just 'going through the motions', as well as when they are more genuinely open and engaged. It is very likely that it feels easier to do serve and return with some infants and harder to do with others. Noticing patterns of what is working well and what isn't can help the teaching team to identify and try out small changes, access extra resources or expert help, or have new conversations.

**Talk about serve and return.** Serve and return is reminder of the long-standing cross-cultural wisdom that love, time and attention are essential for all infants. It is not exclusive knowledge only for those who are qualified or highly skilled. Serve and return is also a practical and concrete action rather than a theory. Using the image of serve and return may be a useful way to talk more in ECE teams and communities about nurturing infants by having a common language and clear image of what you are trying to achieve. It can be difficult to talk together about love, attachment, attunement or dyadic interactions, particularly when there are important cultural differences and personal stories that impact the meaning

that individuals bring to these ideas. It is vital that whānau, teachers and caregivers talk honestly and openly about relationships in the lives of infants, and serve and return may be a useful doorway to help start deeper conversations about the quantity and quality of relational interactions that are happening for infants in ECE settings and at home. Being open and curious and speaking up about the hard parts of serve and return requires courage and vulnerability. Creating a space and a team culture where teachers and caregivers feel safe enough to reflect and talk about the real and often deeply personal challenges of providing responsive, emotionally attuned interactions with children is a skilled and important task for leaders.

**Use serve and return as a touchstone.** Relationships are at the heart of *Te Whāriki*, and the importance of relationships for learning and the holistic wellbeing of children is well established. However, it is easy to get distracted by lots of competing priorities and immediate demands, to be overwhelmed by the difficult issues in children's lives, or to find it hard to say exactly what you are doing to build responsive and attuned relationships. Serve and return can be a helpful anchor point for good practice and purpose among the complexities of early childhood education. In the same way that focusing on breathing can calm and centre us when we get anxious, focusing on doing the simple actions of serve and return can be of immediate benefit to children and help teachers and caregivers to notice and think about what matters.

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