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“Serve & Return”



“Relationships are all there is” – Margaret J. Wheatley

Close your eyes and imagine that magical feeling of falling in love. Think of the hours spent talking, with eyes glued on the other, and that incredible feeling of being understood and valued. When that attention is focused on us we feel connected and capable of any challenges that come our way.

We can help our children, from the very beginning of life, develop the confidence and resilience they will need to face whatever comes their way.

It used to be thought that babies were “a blank slate” when they were born. Today we know that children are born expecting a relationship.

“A baby’s first relationships shape *all* future relationships,” says Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl, Director of the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP.)

With that in mind it makes sense to ensure children experience a positive first relationship. All it takes are ordinary, everyday actions. The pay-off is extraordinary. When children feel strongly connected to a parent -- or another

loving caregiver -- it puts them on a trajectory for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.

Research on lifelong mental, emotional and physical health tells us that a key indicator is social and emotional health from early in life. We can promote this in our children by being “a responsive caregiver.”

One easy-to-learn strategy that we can use with our children, from birth to adulthood (!) is often referred to as Serve and Return. The terminology comes from the game of tennis. It involves paying close attention to our children and their interests.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/> breaks down the method into five steps:

- 1) Notice the serve and share the child’s focus of attention;
- 2) Return the serve by supporting and encouraging;
- 3) Give it a name!
- 4) Take turns ... and wait. Keep the interaction going back and forth;
- 5) Practice endings and beginnings.

No matter the age of the child, the child takes the lead. A newborn infant might be looking at your face or moving their arms and legs or crying. This is the “serve”. To “return the serve” and support and encourage your baby, you can use facial expressions, words or comforting actions. You might engage in face-to-face eye contact or use caring touch to respond.

With an older infant you might pick up an object they are looking or pointing at. Smiling and nodding at your child lets them know you are noticing what they are noticing. This helps your child to feel understood.

When you name what your child is seeing, feeling or doing, you are contributing to your child’s brain development, language acquisition and social and emotional

health. With a child of any age you are showing that you are attuned to them and their interests. This builds the relationship with you.

Anyone who has taught – at any level -- or been a radio or TV interviewer knows the value of “wait time.” In Serve and Return waiting is an ideal way to encourage your child to “keep the turns going.” When you patiently wait for your child to respond, your child has time to come up with their own ideas and a response. When your child waits for you to respond your child is learning “self-control and how to get along with others.”

Let your child lead again when they are ready to end their activity and move on to something else. In this way you are supporting their burgeoning independence.

You can use Serve and Return throughout the day, anytime and anywhere. You might want to use it when grocery shopping or when waiting at an appointment or in a line-up.

Being responsive to a child’s interests and needs helps them to build trust and empathy. Showing respect for their feelings – and naming their feelings – encourages the child to express their feelings. Using caring touch teaches them what healthy touch looks and feels like, and helps with brain development. Paying attention to your child and their interests helps them to feel valued and loved.

Babies and young children often need to learn how to interact with other children. Parent-baby groups provide an ideal safe place for babies and young children to learn these skills with a parent there to guide them. Children who learn how to get along with others have a tremendous advantage throughout life. They will know how to get along with classmates, teachers and later, with colleagues and bosses. Chances are we know people for whom making and keeping friends seems “second nature.” Most likely they had at least one loving and consistent relationship when they were an infant.

All of us struggle with relationships sometimes, especially with our reliance on technology. Occasional miscommunications are hard to avoid. For some people, however, their relationship problems are never-ending. It may be that their very

first relationship was chaotic. No one provided consistent and responsive care to them when they were an infant or toddler.

Others who struggle with relationships may have a medical reason for this, possibly a condition that interferes with “reading” others. Early recognition of these conditions and early intervention can change the life course of a child.

In all instances, a child’s first relationship is critically important. All children need to be cared for by someone who is emotionally present, who looks into their child’s eyes rather than into their cell phone, and engages in nurturing behaviours.

Nurturing seems instinctive, but it is learned, most often in our parents’ arms. If parents did not benefit from early nurture it can be difficult for them to provide the nurturance essential for their child’s social and emotional health. It is helpful for these parents to seek support. Often, once they can make meaning of the reasons for their challenges, they can overcome them and become loving and nurturing parents.

Serve and Return is an ideal way to build your child’s brain, their language skills, social and emotional health and their loving relationship with you – a relationship that will last a lifetime.