



# Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII ♥ WINDWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## Using Serve and Return Interactions

What do you do when a baby coos at you? Do you respond with a smile, eye contact and vocalizations (coo back and talk to him)? If so, you are doing exactly what you should to support his brain development!

The first five years of a child's life is a period of profound brain growth and development. According to researchers, 90% of a child's brain develops during this time; therefore, the experiences he has in the early years play a critical role in shaping a solid brain architecture so he can thrive in school and in life.

What are these important early experiences that he needs? As a child's first care provider(s), you play a significant role in his brain development. **One of the most important things you can do is to simply respond to him – respond to his verbalizations, facial expressions and gestures; this is known as *serve and return interactions*.** It is like a game of tennis. A child points to something or makes a sound and the adult returns the serve by noticing and responding with words, eye contact, or a hug. Researchers



state this type of interaction is one of the most essential experiences for supporting brain development.

This newsletter will address the important role that you play in your child's brain development, and offer strategies and tips for increasing serve and return opportunities with your child.

### In This Newsletter:

To support you in fostering your child's healthy development and school readiness, this newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child's development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Community Resources:** for more information about this topic, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.



# Infants

Although babies cannot yet communicate with words, a large part of their early brain development occurs as a result of their early interactions and “conversations” with their care providers. Pay attention to your serve and return interactions and do more of it. For example, as you give him a bath, what are some of the ways he communicates with you? What are some ways you respond to his vocalizations, gestures and facial expressions? Keep in mind that everyday routines provide rich opportunities for serve and return interactions with your child.

To increase serve and return opportunities with your infant:

- ♥ Make frequent eye contact.
- ♥ Hold baby so he can see your face.
- ♥ Play games such as “Peek-A-Boo.”
- ♥ When baby coos, babbles or makes other vocalizations, do it back.
- ♥ During any routine activity, such as diapering, describe what you are doing and respond to baby’s vocalizations and gestures – “Yes, I know that feels cold. Almost done!”



## Activity for Infants: *I See You*

Materials: None

What to Do:

1. Pick your child up and place him in your arms. Each time he looks at you, respond by giving him a smile or by talking to him. Say in a parentese\* voice, “I see \_\_\_\_\_ (say his name) looking at me.” Respond to his gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations. As he tracks objects, talk about these objects. For example, if he gazes at the ceiling fan say, “I see \_\_\_\_\_ (name) looking at the ceiling fan.” “What is the ceiling fan doing?” “Yes, it’s going round and round.”
2. Allow baby time to vocalize by making cooing and babbling noises. Then reply back to him. Make it fun by being silly with him.

\*parentese: a type of speech where an adult talks to a child in an exaggerated and repetitive way; also called “baby talk.”

*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)*



## Toddlers

Because of their increased mobility, toddlers are more active in exploring the world around them. Pay attention to what he may be seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, or tasting. Use these opportunities to increase your serve and return interactions with him. For example, if he perks



up after hearing a sound outside, respond to him by saying, “Did you hear something?” (pause for response) “I did, too. I think it may be a garbage truck. What do you think?” (wait for response) “Let’s go outside and look!” These types of interactions provide the continuing stimulation needed for healthy brain development.

To increase serve and return opportunities with your toddler:

- ♥ When your toddler points to something, say the item’s name.
- ♥ Allow him to choose books to read and activities to do and respond with enthusiasm to his selections.
- ♥ Narrate what he is doing. “I see you are lining up the cars....” Pause to listen to his response then continue, “You put all the red ones together and all the blue ones together....”
- ♥ Read books together. Ask questions about the story and answer any questions he may ask.
- ♥ Sing songs together, initiate movements and imitate his movements and gestures.

### Activity for Toddlers: *Doodling Together with Crayons*

#### Materials:

Jumbo crayons  
Paper

#### What to Do:

1. Line a table with newspaper. Allow him to pick up the crayons and scribble freely on the paper. Observe what he is doing and then talk to him about the different lines and shapes that he is making, and the colors he is using.
2. Take a crayon and begin scribbling and drawing with him. Copy his scribbles, marks and colors. Then create your own simple drawings. Talk to him about what lines and shapes you are creating. You could also tell a story as you are scribbling and drawing.
3. Have him try to copy you by drawing what you are drawing. Praise him for his efforts. Allow him to freely hold the crayons in a natural position that feels right to him.



*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)*



## Preschoolers

As their brains continue to develop, preschoolers exhibit more complex thinking skills. They are fascinated and curious about their surroundings and increasingly intentional in seeking new knowledge and experiences. Use your child's curiosity as opportunities to increase your serve and return interactions with him. For example, if he is intrigued with bugs, go on a bug hunt, borrow and read books about bugs, count bugs, give him the opportunity to observe a caterpillar turn into a butterfly, etc. By responding to something he is naturally interested in and by giving him more experiences with that subject matter, you increase his learning and thinking skills.



To increase serve and return opportunities with your preschooler:

- ♥ Discover your child's interests and plan learning activities that build upon them.
- ♥ Acknowledge your child's efforts, not just the results. For example, "You worked hard at that puzzle."
- ♥ Use "serve and return" interactions in pretend play. For example, pretend a table and a few chairs is a restaurant and say, "Does your restaurant serve pizza?" Wait for your child to respond and build on his answer.
- ♥ Watch how your child plays with toys or objects and use "math talk" whenever possible. For example, "I count 1-2-3-4-5 red blocks in your tower!" "Which one is longer?" or "Which do you have more of?"
- ♥ Give encouragement such as hugs, high fives, and thumbs up on accomplishments and displaying positive behaviors.

### Activity for Preschoolers: *Rollercoaster*

#### Materials:

Reusable materials such as foam insulation tubes, cardboard, PVC pipes  
Tape  
Balls, marbles, or toy cars

#### What to Do:

1. Research what roller coasters look like in books and videos and talk to your child about the structure of the roller coaster.
2. Together gather materials to build your roller coaster. Listen to his ideas on how to connect the different materials. Follow his lead as he adds twists and turns.
3. Now have your child place the balls, marbles or toy cars at the top of his roller coaster structure, and together watch as they wind and twist to the bottom.
4. Allow him to make mistakes, let him come up with troubleshooting ideas, and share your own ideas on how to fix it.
5. Respond to his enthusiasm, give high fives and do it again!

*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)*



## How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

### Physical Development

- ♥ Use and strengthen small muscles such as facial muscles, fingers, hands, and toes
- ♥ Develop eye-hand coordination

### Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Develop a close bond with you
- ♥ Feel important and good about himself

### Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Learn to ask and answer questions
- ♥ Build verbal skills, vocabulary, and use of descriptive language

### Cognitive Development

- ♥ Develop his curiosity about how things work
- ♥ Develop his creativity and imagination
- ♥ Develop his thinking and problem solving skills



## Kids in the Kitchen

Cooking teaches valuable lessons. As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show him how to handle items safely and allow him to do as much as he is capable of. Ask questions throughout the process to encourage his thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

### Fruit Mosaic Pizza

Adapted from: <http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/Global/story.asp?S=372891>

#### Ingredients:

- 4 rice cakes
- ¼ cup soft cream cheese
- Dash of vanilla
- 1 cup of assorted fresh and dried fruit

#### Instructions:

1. In a small bowl, help your child measure the cream cheese, add vanilla and stir to blend.
2. Wash the fruit with your child. Allow older children to cut the softer fruits into small pieces with a plastic knife.
3. Have your child spread cream cheese on top of each rice cake to cover it.
4. Let your child decorate with different fruits. Enjoy eating together!



## Community Resources

### Zero to Three: What You Can Do to Support Brain Development

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/what-you-can-do-to-support-brain-development>

Provides free age-based handouts to help you learn how the brains of infants and toddlers grow, and how you can support healthy brain development.

### How Brains are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development, Alberta Family Wellness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmVWOe1ky8s>

### Serve and Return Interactions Shapes Brain Circuitry, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/serve-return-interaction-shapes-brain-circuitry/>

### Brain rules for Baby: Talk with Your Baby

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkeYwh6G9Ho&t=3s>



## Suggested Books

Recommended by **Hawaii State Public Library** [www.librarieshawaii.org](http://www.librarieshawaii.org).

### Infants and Toddlers

#### *Haiku Baby* by Betsy E. Snyder

A colorful board book that is filled with nature: a fish, leaf, snowflake, and raindrop. The words are in poetic form, using the Japanese haiku. Babies will be delighted in using their fingers to turn the tabs.

#### *Please, Mr. Panda* by Steve Antony

Mr. Panda asks a bunch of his friends, “Who would like a doughnut?” All of the animals forget to use polite words like “please” and “thank you.” Will anyone be worthy of Mr. Panda’s doughnuts?

### Preschoolers

#### *You Are (Not) Small* by Anna Kang

Two creatures cannot agree on who is small and who is big until other creatures help them solve their problem.

#### *Don't Throw That Away* by Lara Bergen

Follow an ecofriendly super hero as she teaches children to recycle and reuse common household items. There are six large flaps that children can flip to find different ways to turn ordinary trash into a treasure.



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