

N is for **Newborns**

Engaging in Brain-Building Interactions

A newborn's or infant's brain develops faster than at any other time in a child's life. Research shows that during this early period, back-and-forth interactions with caregivers, also known as "serve and return" interactions, strengthen neural connections in the brain¹. These connections are important for early learning and they establish pathways for future learning. Relationships with nurturing and responsive caregivers are foundational for early learning and beyond.

Five Strategies For Back-And-Forth Interactions

Practice these five strategies to participate in back-and-forth interactions with infants every day.

Strategy 1. Look for an infant's "serve" in everyday routines and activities.

Behaviors that involve things an infant does or looks at are "serves" and allow caregivers opportunities to respond. Noticing what an infant does (e.g., kicking legs) or looks towards (e.g., a mobile) will help you recognize when a serve happens.

Strategy 2. Respond to the "serve".

There are many ways to respond to an infant's serve, such as looking in the same direction, touching, or talking. When you respond to an infant's serve, you are acknowledging the serve and "returning" it, which helps an infant learn early communication and interaction skills. Caregivers may also make a serve and wait for the infant to respond.

Strategy 3. Name what the infant sees, does, or needs.

One way children learn words is by listening to others talk. When you use words to describe what an infant sees, does, or needs, you build connections in the brain that support early communication and interaction skills long before an infant begins to talk.

Strategy 4. Wait for the infant to respond.

Waiting 2-3 seconds after you return a serve gives the infant an opportunity to continue the interaction by taking another turn.

Strategy 5. Follow the infant's lead.

Infants give cues to signal when they want to begin, continue, or end an interaction or exchange. Noticing and responding to these cues help build more serve-and-return interactions.

What We are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators are helping families and practitioners learn how to engage in back-and-forth interactions during everyday routines using the 3R's of Early Learning: Relationships, Repetition, and Routines.

¹ Center on the Developing Child. (2007). The science of early childhood development (InBrief). <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-eecd/>