

Make moments matter



Every moment matters for a child's development. Take opportunities to embed serve, return, and rally interactions into everyday moments (Houen et al., 2026).

Creating space for interactions

Opportunities to interact with children can occur at any time during the day. It's about making the most of everyday moments.

Examples of everyday moments:



Sharing stories



Travel (e.g., in the car, on a bus)



Indoors



Feeding and mealtimes



Whole group times



Play



Care moments (e.g., cleaning teeth, nappy change)



Small group/one on one interaction



Goodbyes and hellos



Cooking



Music and movement



Video/audio calls



Shopping



Outdoors



Book sharing

The Serve-Return-Rally-Learn (SRRL) framework

The SRRL framework helps us understand how simple, everyday interactions can support children's learning and development. Think of it like a tennis game that goes back and forth between an adult and child. It's based on a sequence:



Serve – When adult or child starts an interaction (e.g., a gesture, sound, word, or action).

Return – When adult or child responds to the serve.



Rally – When interactions continue over several turns, focused on the same topic.

Learn – When the child feels safe and builds skills and understanding through these sustained exchanges.



These interactions can be verbal or non-verbal, depending on the child's age, preferences, and context.

Anyone can serve and return. An infant may use eye gaze or babbling to serve, a toddler may point, use a word or give a toy, and a preschool child may ask a question. Similarly, adults can serve using both verbal (e.g., asking a question, providing information) and non-verbal turns (e.g., eye contact and facial expression combined with a point).

When adults are sensitive and responsive to children's communication cues, they may move between leading and following a child. With an older child an adult might use an open-ended question to seek the child's opinion. However, with a younger child, the adult may begin with an open question and follow up with a yes/no question when the child does not respond (Degotardi et al., 2018; Houen et al., 2022). When adults do this they expose children to different question types and adjust for a child's development and communication preferences. This enables a child to contribute. The goal is to keep the interaction going.

Children as 'knowers'

Serve-return-rally interactions require adults to engage as interactional partners not experts. From infancy, young children have a right to be treated as 'knowers' and 'thinkers'. When children are viewed as knowledgeable, and their ideas and views are valued, they have more opportunities to contribute to interactions (Degotardi & Han, 2022).

Ways to position a child with knowledge



Indicate that you are not an expert and are interested in finding out more

- Try using 'I wonder...' statements: You could ask, "I wonder what might come out of this egg when it hatches" or "I wonder do all eggs hatch into birds?"
- Try using words or statements that indicate uncertainty, such as "might", "maybe", "possibly", "could". (e.g., Child asks, "Mum what's this?" Mum, "mmm it looks like it's a shiny rock it might have come from space?" How do you think it got here?")

When you do this, you:

- place yourself in a position of not knowing
- encourage a child to share and play with their thoughts and ideas
- encourage longer back and forth interactions
- are less likely to judge a child's ideas as 'right' or 'wrong'



When playing:

- Ask children to describe their ideas, the resources they need, and their plans.
- Notice infants' and toddlers' cues and provide a commentary of what they're doing. Take the opportunity to engage in serve-return-rally interactions.

When you do this, you:

- allow children to take the lead
- encourage children to express their ideas
- show children their ideas are valued
- support play



Ways to value children's ideas

When solving problems:

- Encourage children to identify the problem: You could ask, "what's the problem?" or "what happened?". For infants you might narrate a potential response (e.g., oh you have a wet nappy, would you like me to change it?).

When you do this, you:

- open the topic for further interaction
- encourage children to share their thoughts and ideas about the problem
- model the serve-return-rally sequence

- Brainstorm possible solutions to the problem so that they think and share their ideas (rather than relying on adults to 'fix it'). You could ask, "I wonder what we could do?" or "How do you think we could solve this problem?"

When you do this, you:

- invite children to contribute their ideas
- position them with knowledge
- foster joint attention

- Reflect on solutions together.

When you do this, you:

- show children their ideas are valued
- open interactions about why the solution did or did not work
- demonstrate that adults don't always know the answers

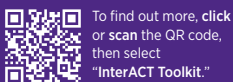


Ask questions that you really don't know the answer to

- Try asking a child about their weekend: For example, If you know that a child was going to the zoo, you could ask, "How was the zoo?"

When you do this, you:

- make the interaction genuine
- remove the perception that you are testing
- show interest



To find out more, click or scan the QR code, then select "InterACT Toolkit."



Houen, Mulvihill et al., 2026

