

The Serve-Return-Rally-Learn Framework



Our interactions with children matter! Every interaction we have with a child—whether through words, gestures, or facial expressions—shapes the neural connections in their brain, influencing how they develop, think and feel.

The term ‘serve and return’ (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011) is often used to describe the type of interactions that best support child development. This metaphor—drawn from ball games like tennis or volleyball—helps us picture responsive, back-and-forth exchanges where one person “serves” an interactional cue and the other “returns” it.

Researchers at the University of Queensland have expanded this metaphor into the **Serve-Return-Rally-Learn (SRRL)** framework (Houen et al., 2026). This model builds on the original concept by emphasizing the importance of **sustained interactions**—or *rallies*—between adults and children, which are key to promoting learning.

What is the Serve-Return-Rally-Learn framework?

The SRRL framework describes a sequence of **Serve-Return-Rally (SRR)** interactions that create opportunities for children to **Learn (L)**. These interactions are not limited to verbal (e.g., words and sounds) verbal exchanges (e.g., words and sounds). They can be non-verbal and gestural, depending on each child’s age, communication preferences, and context.

Understanding Serve-Return-Rally Interactions

Importantly, both adults and children can serve and return. These sustained interactions require adults to be attuned to children’s cues and to respond in ways that may keep the interaction going.



Serve

A serve is a starting move that begins an interaction—such as a gesture, sound, word, or action.

A return is a response to that serve.



Return



Rally

A rally occurs when this back-and-forth exchange continues over several turns focused on the same topic.

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



Learn

What learning opportunities are afforded during serve-return-rally interactions?

Serve-return-rally interactions promote rich learning opportunities. They:



Deepen engagement



Build and strengthen brain connections



Support communication skills



Enhance executive functioning



Foster emotional regulation



Nurture social and emotional capabilities

How to engage in SRRL interactions

Effective SRRL interactions involve treating children as **equal partners**, not passive recipients. The goal is to take opportunities for meaningful interactions and make every moment matter (see Make Moments Matter Tip Sheet).

A well-stocked interactional toolkit helps adults stay sensitive and responsive, providing opportunities for enriching interactions that shape learning. Research on tools that support rallies can be grouped into three key categories: relational dynamics, contingent responses, and questioning.

Where and when can serve-return-rally interactions occur?

Serve-return-rally interactions can happen anywhere and anytime—during car rides, shopping trips, nappy changes, or play and learning routines. The key is to notice opportunities, respond to children’s verbal and non-verbal communication cues, and use strategies that promote sustained interactions.

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., 2023).

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
- Feeding and mealtimes
- Care moments (e.g., cleaning teeth, nappy change)
- Looking
- Shopping
- Travel (e.g., in the car, on a bus)
- Whole group times
- Small group times on one interaction
- Music and movement
- Outdoors
- Indoors
- Play
- Goodbyes and hellos
- Video/voice calls
- 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 the interactions that give back and turn them into an adult and child's interaction or engagement.

When adults are sensitive and responsive to children's communication cues, they may notice children's hearing and following a child. With an older child, an adult might use an open-ended question to elicit the child's opinion. However, with a younger child, the adult may begin with an open question and follow up with a specific question when the child does not respond (DeGroot et al., 2018; Houen et al., 2023). When adults do this, they provide children to answer question types and adjust for a child's developmental and communication preferences. This enables a child to contribute. The goal is to keep the interaction going.

Keep the rally going

Serve-return-rally interactions are the type of interactions that children need to thrive (Houen et al., 2023). When a child is an active participant, they are more engaged and likely to contribute more often. Adults can use a number of strategies to keep the rally going. You can:

Make the interaction personal
Children will contribute more to interactions if their own experiences, ideas and interests are the focus (Houen et al., 2023). You can help a child make personal connections to current events by:

- creating space and time to link conversations to their own experiences;
- making connections to their world and incorporate their interests;
- encouraging ideas and opinions to personalize conversation;
- encouraging ideas and opinions to indicate that contributions are valued.

There are a range of strategies that can support personally meaningful interactions with children. These include:

Brainstorming:

- Adults can increase by encouraging a child to make to and talk about past experiences. Adults might use videos, photos and places to connect children to those experiences.

Second stories:

- Second stories are offered after a story is given by one person as if "told to the person in the next."
- A second story follows when another person offers their story as if "told next to the one in the previous, and I told the previous."

Phases:

- Phase 1: An immediate event to personal experience.
- Phase 2: Child makes a personal connection.
- Phase 3: Adult builds on this connection to promote a story about making that same "what that did you see at that time?"

Experiment with linking to children's personal lives:

- Experiment with "Reminiscing" – Show a photo of an important event in their life. Give the opportunity to reflect on the event and the child's thoughts and feelings.
- Take a sequence of photos from the start to the end of the day to track a child's mood and explore the experience with others.
- Find out about children's lives. Talk with parents about a child's experiences and interests in their own lives. Encourage personal links to your interactions (e.g., when making a meal about food, they might make a personal connection to a child that has a food to encourage them to talk their story).
- Encourage children to provide a second story or use a photo of different times and contexts.

When you make interactions personal, you:

- give them their interest in the child's experiences.
- encourage children's contributions that are based on their experiences.
- support their attention.
- promote memory development.
- nurture social and emotional understanding.

Curious about questions

Questions are often a strategy that adults use to both serve and return. Combined with other strategies, using a range of questions approaches (e.g., yes/no questions, "wh" questions, how and why, choice and "wonder" questions) can keep interactions going. You can use children's different opportunities to use, develop, and expand their communication skills (Houen et al., 2023).

Did you know
The most engaging talks happen when adults use different strategies (respond to a baby or child's hints or cues).

QUESTIONING APPROACHES

YES/NO QUESTIONS
"Is it autumn?"
Typically result in yes/no responses rather than extended talk.

WH? QUESTIONS
(WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, HOW)
"What reason is it now?" or "What do you know about autumn?"
Can result in one word or longer turns at talk.

"I WONDER..." QUESTIONS
"I wonder what happens outside when it's autumn?"
Work to invite rather than respect a response
Adults are positioned as curious
Adults are less likely to judge answers as right or wrong.

CHOICE QUESTIONS
"Do you think it was a bird or a bear?"
A suitable response from a child by providing a choice.
Tests the child's knowledge or preference.



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

