

What Do Communication and Tennis Have in Common?

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One of the ways to help your child learn to communicate is to have interactions that go back-and-forth many times, with both of you being active participants. Researchers at Harvard University refer to these as “Serve and Return” interactions, which are like a game of tennis [1].

A tennis game starts with someone serving the ball, and the other person returns the serve. Then the ball is hit back and forth, with each player hitting the ball back to the other (known as a “rally”).

You can help your child by thinking of communication as a tennis game. The idea is for your child to start the interaction (serve) and then you respond to your child (return the serve). If you return the serve by saying and doing something related to your child’s message, it’s likely to get a conversation (rally) going.

Why is this important? Well, children who have more of these back-and-forth rallies have more activity in a part of their brain involved in producing and processing speech and language [2].

Here are some tips to help you get the game going!

The Serve

It’s important that your child be the one to start the game by serving. The reason for this is that when your child starts an interaction with you, it allows them to communicate about what is most interesting and important to them. They’re more likely to communicate about what’s captured their interest in the moment and, at the same time, they are more likely to keep the “game” going once you respond.

Your child might serve by:

- Looking at you
- Using facial expression
- Doing an action (e.g., reaching for something, giving you an object, moving their body, or taking your hand)
- Using a gesture (e.g., pointing, waving)
- Saying a sound, word or sentence

Children who are learning to communicate might not serve right away and they may need help to get started. You can encourage your child to serve by waiting and observing, without talking.

Wait for the serve

Young children need time to think about the message they want to send. If you stop and wait (without talking), it gives your child a chance to notice things, have ideas, and send a message to you. While you wait, face your child and be down at their physical level so they know you are paying attention and eager to hear their message.

Observe the serve

Sometimes young children communicate in subtle ways. If you observe your child while you are waiting, you may notice their actions or sounds that you wouldn't otherwise see or hear. Watching closely also helps you notice what your child is interested in, and this gives you clues about how best to return their serve.

The Return

Once your child sends a message (serves the ball), it's your turn to respond (return the serve) by saying something about what your child did or said.

In tennis, you have to return the ball within the tennis court – if you hit it outside of the lines, the rally ends. In the same way, your response has to stay within the lines, which means it has to stay on your child's topic and relate to what they did or said. Because you observed your child closely as they served, you'll be able to connect your response to their topic.

Here are some examples of serves and the first return:

Serve (child's turn)	Return (adult's response)
Child looks out the window at a bird and says "buh"	Adult: points to the bird and says "There's a bird in the tree!"
Child points to some dirt on their pants	Adult: kneels down to look at the pants and says "Oh, your pants are dirty."
Child wriggles in the swing, wanting a push	Adult: pushes the swing and says "Ok, I'll push you!"
Child covers mom's head with a blanket to play Peekaboo and says "Mommy"	Adult: hides under the blanket and says "Where's Mommy?"

Keep the rally going!

If you've returned your child's serve by following their lead, your child is likely to keep the rally going. The idea is to try to keep the ball going back-and-forth between you and your child, with each of you taking turns communicating about your child's interest. You can encourage your child to keep the game going by waiting again after you return their serve. Waiting gives your child time to think about what to do or say next.

If your child becomes interested in something else, they will start a new rally. Keep observing your child and wait for them to serve again, and then return it by responding to their interests. The more rallies you have, the more opportunities your child will have to practice communicating! Here's an example of a rally from the *It Takes Two to Talk*® guidebook [3]. Watch how this child starts the interaction with a serve – he points out the window at the bus and says “Mommy, buh”. Mom returns the serve by responding with “Yes, there's the bus.” The conversation keeps going and they rally back-and-forth, talking about the bus.

If you think about communication like a game of tennis, you're sure to have some fun back-and-forth interactions with your child, and you'll be providing your child with language that matches their interests. Besides learning some new words, your child will learn a lot about how to have a conversation.

These ideas are based on information from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. For more information about Serve and Return interactions and the science that supports them, visit their website.

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Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those on the autism spectrum, and those who are developing typically.

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