Healthy "Serve and Return" Interactions Video Series

Child Welfare Training Guide

2017

Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Contents

Background and Overview

In 2015-2016, the University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development (ICD) and Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) partnered with the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) to create and produce a series of five videos about the concept of healthy "serve and return" interactions between children and their adult caregivers, as well as other related early childhood development concepts.

These five videos show healthy "serve and return" interactions between five adoptive parents and their young children. The children range in age from 20 months to 35 months old. The purpose is to provide examples for training professionals and others who work with children in out of home placement or at risk of out of home placement. These include but are not limited to: child welfare investigators, case workers, supervisors, foster care licensers, foster parents, adoptive parents, biological parents, attorneys, judges, guardians ad litem, and anyone else working with these children and families. The videos are provided free for training purposes.

This guide supports the use of the training videos and provides additional information for learning, including case examples.

The videos can be found here:

https://z.umn.edu/serve-and-return

To access the videos, please click on this link
(available here and on the website link) and fill out the form:

https://z.umn.edu/serve-and-return-access

We will then send you the password to watch the videos.
The password/login merely allows us to keep track of who
is using the videos and for what purpose, and so that we may
report this as non-idenitified information to our funders

Glossary: Key Concepts

Attunement: involves the adult paying close attention to the child so the adult can understand the child's thoughts and feelings and they can share in the experience together. This allows the adult to act in ways that make sense to the child and lets the child feel understood and cared for.

Following the child's lead: occurs when the adult pauses, steps back, and watches their child to see how the child approaches a situation before jumping in with their own ideas. Allowing the child to act first gives the child a sense of responsibility and confidence.

Goodness of fit: is how adults can match the support they give to a child's mood and personality. Every child is different, so adults may need to adjust their level of activity, excitement, and risk to create a good fit for a specific child.

Mirroring: is when *an adult copies* what the child does. This can be very rewarding to the child because it shows that the adult noticed what they are doing, and they are now doing it together.

Negotiating competing interests: occurs when the child and adult have different desires. It is important for adults to acknowledge what the child wants and support the child's ideas, while providing compromises so both people's goals can be met.

Positive reinforcement: is using words or actions to tell the child they are doing something right. When children understand what behaviors are approved of by adults, they do more of those behaviors.

Repairing missteps: is when an adult recognizes a child's signal that they are overwhelmed or dislike something the adult has *done*, and the adult uses that information to make changes in themselves or the activity so the child is more comfortable.

Responding to children's signals and cues: occurs when adults closely watch children's behaviors for clues about how they are feeling and thinking, and then respond in a way that matches the child's needs at that moment.

Scaffolding: involves helping a child to solve a problem that they could not do on their own. The adult provides just enough help so the child can be successful, but still allows the child to be the main actor.

Serve and return: is the process of a child and adult taking turns acting and responding to each other's action. This process lets the child know that the adult is paying attention to them and cares about what they are doing.

Structuring the environment: is when an adult is able to help or direct a child by changing the environment (e.g. the positioning of pieces, removing distractions in the room) rather than directly asking the child to change what they are doing. Adults are often able to make changes to the environment that help children be more successful.

Taking the child's perspective: occurs when an adult is able to set aside what they think or feel about a situation and look at it from the child's point of view. When this occurs, adults are able to act in ways that provide more comfort and learning opportunities for the child.

Things to Consider & Things to Say

If You Are a Child Protection Case Worker

Many of the caregivers on your caseload may not have experienced healthy serve and return interactions in their own childhood. Unless they have had some kind of "repair" experience, they may not know how to provide these types of interactions for their child, or why these are important. These videos are designed to be concrete examples of every-day activities that can help caregivers recognize serve and return interactions with their own children.

You can make a difference in these families' lives by noticing times when you DO see positive interactions and offering positive feedback to parents. If you understand these ideas and what to look for, you can notice and encourage this type of caregiving in biological, resource, or adoptive parents. By using these concepts, you can help caregivers recognize how these types of interactions support their child's brain and overall development.

If You Are an Adoption Worker

As you are working with prospective adoptive parents, you can share these ideas with them. Many of the children on your caseload will not have experienced healthy interactions or the type of serve-and-return you have seen in these videos. For these children, it can be helpful if their new caregivers have the tools to intentionally provide these positive interactions to give children the chance to catch up.

You can support a new adoptive placement by helping the adoptive parents understand what their child needs. As children are constantly growing and changing, it is important to emphasize that the adults can learn a lot about children's needs by paying close attention to the verbal and nonverbal signals they give.

You can notice whether the adoptive parent engages in the type of interactions seen in the videos. If yes, point these out to the parent so they can recognize them and purposefully increase them. If not, you can support them in the process of learning about what types of interactions encourage healthy development in young children.

Suggestions of Things to Say (to a parent, foster parent, or adoptive parent):

- "When you follow what your child wants to do, you help his brain and body develop confidence."

- "Did you see how your child smiled at you when you copied what he did? He was happy that you noticed him and played his game too."

- "What might your child be thinking or feeling right now? Your child might be having a different experience than you, even when you are doing the same thing!"

- "I noticed you showed your child how to use the crayons but then let her color the picture herself. She learns so much when she gets to practice herself!"

- "Even though your child doesn't have words yet, it sounds like he is having a conversation with you! When you repeat the noises he makes and you take turns talking, your child learns how to interact with others in a positive way."

Case Study #1: Mom and 30-month-old son

Brief summary: This video shows a mother and her 30-month-old high-energy, distractible, do-it-myself toddler. While exploring new toys and cleaning up, the mother provides guidance and enforces basic rules while still maintaining a fun atmosphere and positive relationship with her child.

Key Early Childhood Development Concepts

Following the child's lead: occurs when the adult pauses, steps back, and watches their child to see how the child approaches a situation before jumping in with their own ideas. Allowing the child to act first gives the child a sense of responsibility and confidence.

Scaffolding: involves helping a child to solve a problem that they could not do on their own. The adult provides just enough help so the child can be successful, but still allows the child to be the main actor.

Repairing missteps: is when an adult recognizes a child's signal that they are overwhelmed or dislike something the adult has **done**, and the adult uses that information to make changes in themselves or the activity so the child is more comfortable.

Things to consider if you are a resource/foster parent

Enforcing rules consistently (e.g. both at home and when away from home) makes the rules predictable for the child. It is easier for children to cooperate when they know what to expect.

Pick your battles: There are some cases when it is important for a child to follow a rule, but in play and exploration, there does not have to be one "right way" to do it. If the goal is to have fun, let the child use their imagination and play in whatever way they think of, rather than always trying to teach a child the "right" or "normal" way to use a toy.

Look for joy! Children's energy and curiosity can be exhausting, but it can also be a source of great fun. Join in and play together with your child – they love having a partner rather than just an observer or supervisor.

Think about:

- What rules do you try to keep consistent at home and away from home?

- When is it important for a child to do it "right" versus freely explore?

- In what situations are you able to join in your child's joy?

Case Study #2: Mom and 34 month-old daughter

Brief summary: This video shows a mother interacting with her 34-month-old daughter in a difficult task. The mother supports the child in completing the task for a while, but when the child wants to play her own way, the mother is able to switch gears and let the child explore the materials, as she likes.

Key Early Childhood Development Concepts

Following the child's lead: occurs when the adult pauses, steps back, and watches their child to see how the child approaches a situation before jumping in with their own ideas. Allowing the child to act first gives the child a sense of responsibility and confidence.

Negotiating competing interests: occurs when the child and adult have different desires. It is important for adults to acknowledge what the child wants and support the child's ideas, while providing compromises so both people's goals can be met.

Things to consider if you are a resource/ foster parent

Let your child know that you understand and value their opinions. It can be helpful to label their wants and emotions with words (e.g. "You really want to play with that right now, don't you.") so the child knows you understand. Even if it is not an option at that moment to do what the child wants, showing you understand and care, rather than dismissing their opinion as bad or unimportant, can be helpful for developing a positive relationship.

There are many ways to learn! Playing and exploring provide children with lots of information about the objects they are using. So if a goal is too difficult for the child, letting the child explore with fewer rules can help them get ready for harder tasks in the future.

Think About:

- How do you show your child you value their opinion even when they cannot have their way?

- When a child is confronted with a problem that is too hard for them, how do you support learning in that situation?

Case Study #3: Dad and 20-month-old daughter

Brief summary: This video shows a father and his 20-month-old daughter playing with and then cleaning up blocks. The father consistently pays close attention to the child's cues and reacts in a way that she feels connected to and approved by him.

Key Early Childhood Development Concepts

Mirroring: is when an adult copies what the child does. This can be very rewarding to the child because it shows that the adult noticed what they are doing, and they are now doing it together.

Scaffolding: involves helping a child to solve a problem that they could not do on their own. The adult provides just enough help so the child can be successful, but still allows the child to be the main actor.

Structuring the environment: when an adult is able to help or direct a child by changing the environment (e.g. the positioning of pieces, removing distractions in the room) rather than directly asking the child to change what they are doing. Adults are often able to make changes to the environment that help children be more successful.

Following the child's lead: occurs when the adult pauses, steps back, and watches their child to see how the child approaches a situation before jumping in with their own ideas. Allowing the child to act first gives the child a sense of responsibility and confidence.

Positive reinforcement: is using words or actions to tell the child they are doing something good. When children understand what behaviors adults approve of, they seek to do more of those behaviors.

Things to consider if you are a resource/foster parent

When working on a tough problem with your child, figure out what your child can do and let them do it. Your child might need a lot of guidance and modeling, but there is always some small piece that they can do on their own, so make sure they have the opportunity to do so.

Children are constantly watching your reaction. How you respond to your child in everyday situations provides the answers to basic questions such as "Am I good?" "Can I do it?" "Is this safe?" Your words and body language are both important. When you purposefully encourage and connect with your child, they can form the beliefs that they are loved and they can expect success.

When adults create routines with specific cues (e.g. having a clean-up song), children are able to form expectations about the world around them. These cues are especially important during transitions, and can help reduce distress when fun is ending.

Think about:

- How do you balance teaching your child a skill and letting them do it themselves?
- How are you communicating the messages you want your child to understand?

Case Study #4: Mom and 35-month-old daughter

Brief summary: This video shows a mother interacting with her 35-month-old daughter while playing and cleaning up. The mom pays close attention to what the child is experiencing. She is able to manage frustrating situations and enforce consistent structure so the child can continue to reach the goals of the play.

Key Early Childhood Development Concepts

Following the child's lead: occurs when the adult pauses, steps back, and watches their child to see how the child approaches a situation before jumping in with their own ideas. Allowing the child to act first gives the child a sense of responsibility and confidence.

Mirroring: is when an adult copies what the child does. This can be very rewarding to the child because it shows that the adult noticed what they are doing, and they are now doing it together.

Attunement: involves the adult paying close attention to the child so the adult can understand the child's thoughts and feelings and they can share in the experience together. This allows the adult to act in ways that make sense to the child and lets the child feel understood and cared for.

Positive Reinforcement: is using words or actions to tell the child they are doing something good. When children understand what behaviors adults approve of, they seek to do more of those behaviors.

Scaffolding: involves helping a child to solve a problem that they could not do on their own. The adult provides just enough help so the child can be successful, but still allows the child to be the main actor.

Things to consider if you are a resource/foster parent

Provide simple choices. Children can often become resistant in situations where they feel they are being forced to do something, such as during clean-up time. While cleaning up itself is not optional, adults can provide choices within that task, such as what to pick up first. Even these small choices help children take ownership of the task and feel motivated to complete it.

Before children are speaking in full sentences, it can be hard to understand what they are thinking. However, children provide many other cues to what's happening inside! When adults pay close attention to things like where a child is looking, their facial expressions, and their behavior, there is actually a lot of information about what a child is experiencing in that moment.

Think about:

- What choices do you give your children when doing everyday tasks?

- When is it easy to understand what your child is thinking and feeling? When is it difficult?

Case Study #5: Mom and 26-month-old daughter

Brief summary: This video shows a mother playing with her 26-month-old daughter after the child went through an upsetting experience. The mother exhibits behavior that shows she cares about the child and helps the child calm down and re-engage in play.

Key Early Childhood Development Concepts

Attunement: involves the adult paying close attention to the child so the adult can understand the child's thoughts and feelings and they can share in the experience together. This allows the adult to act in ways that make sense to the child and lets the child feel understood and cared for.

Scaffolding: involves helping a child to solve a problem that they could not do on their own. The adult provides just enough help so the child can be successful, but still allows the child to be the main actor.

Mirroring: is when an adult copies what the child does. This can be very rewarding to the child because it shows that the adult noticed what they are doing, and they are now doing it together.

Taking the child's perspective: occurs when an adult is able to set aside what they think or feel about a situation and look at it from the child's point of view. When this occurs, adults are able to act in ways that provide more comfort and learning opportunities for the child.

Goodness of fit: how adults can match the support they give to a child's mood and personality. Every child is different, and therefore adults may need to adjust their level of activity, excitement, and risk to create a good fit for a specific child.

Things to consider if you are a resource/foster parent

Children watch their caregivers to see what emotions are appropriate in that situation. When an adult is calm and reassuring, a child will recognize that there is nothing to be afraid of. When an adult shows excitement or acts silly, a child sees that it is OK to have fun at the moment. Children rely on the information they get from the adults around them to know how to act in a certain situation.

Every child is different! A parenting technique that worked great with one child may fall flat with another. Because of genetics and experiences early in life, even young children have a lot of variation in characteristics such as fear, anxiety, confidence, risk-taking, and desire for social interaction. When you pay close attention to each child, you can help make navigating the world from their point of view a little easier.

Think about:

• When have you noticed your child adjust their emotion to how you are feeling?

• What aspects of your child's personality are especially significant for how you interact with him/her?

For more information

Useful Websites

- http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/

- http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/

- http://joinvroom.org/

- https://www.parentfurther.com/

- https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html

- http://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/index.html

Please contact us with questions

Center for Early Education and Development
Mary Harrison, Ph.D., LICSW
mharriso@umn.edu and

Alyssa Meuwissen, Ph.D.
asm@umn.edu
http://ceed.umn.edu/

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare
cascw@umn.edu
https://www.cascw.org/