

Ask a child what they like about Christmas and they will likely tell you the toys. Every year there are new must-have toys that every kid wants. They often end up being costly and nearly impossible to find. The good news? A new study suggests the less toys a young child has the more likely they will engage in meaningful play. In the study the children with fewer toys played longer with each toy and found new creative ways to play with each toy. The children with more toys were more distracted and did not play with a single toy for prolonged periods of time. This information is no surprise to some parents and reflects the trend of keeping presents practical and minimalistic. Parents can also take comfort knowing that it doesn't take lots of fancy expensive toys to keep a child happy.

There is no need to deny or refuse toys at Christmas. After all, what is Christmas without toys? Every new toy received can be used as an opportunity to engage with a child in a meaningful way. By engaging with a child in their play, a parent can take part in the serve and return type scenario which helps build the foundation of a child's brain development.

Harvard University has named five steps to engage in this serve and return type activity with a child.

1. Notice the serve and share the child's focus of attention. See what item your child is playing with and watch how they interact with it.
2. Return the serve by encouraging and supporting. Sit near the child and let them know that you are interested in what they are doing, commenting "Oh, I see!"
3. Give it a name. Say out loud what the child is doing with the toy.
4. Take turns and wait, keep the interaction going back and forth. After you serve your comments and attention, allow the child time to return with another action or comment of their own. This can happen back and forth many times.
5. Practice beginnings and endings. Children signal when they are ready to move on to a different activity. They might let go of a toy, pick up a new one, or turn to look at something else. Or they may walk away, start to fuss, or say, "All done!" When you share a child's focus, you'll notice when they are ready to end the activity and begin something new.

If you are looking for tips and ways to play with your child, Alberta Health Services and Parent Link Alberta have a series of information cards called Talk Box. These cards are available on view online at [parentlinkalberta.ca](http://parentlinkalberta.ca) These information cards give specific examples of ways to engage with your baby, toddler, or preschooler in this serve and return scenario. It covers a wide range of toys from balls, blocks, cars, to kitchen centers, stuffed animals, fire trucks, and doll houses.

Harvard University has a short video that simply explains the serve and return concept. It can be seen at <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/>