

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Being Someone to a Child Makes a Difference

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **In this Boost we are examining the important role we all play in the brain healthy development of our children.***

As adults, we play an important role in boosting the brain health of our children. When we react and respond to the babbles, gestures, and cries of a young child we are laying the groundwork for his or her future growth and development. These actions also help to build the neural connections in the brain that support communication and social skills.

Interactions with caregivers — parents, family members, childcare providers, and early childhood educators — are crucial to the brain healthy development of children. Research suggests that having at least one caring, attentive adult in their lives, can support their future success, even in children who grow up in an environment of poverty and trauma.

A responsive relationship, often referred to as “serve and return,” can help children gain the tools they need to develop executive functioning skills, such as planning, cognitive skills, and the ability to pay attention. Without this interaction, children may lack intellectual stimulation, emotional security, and social awareness, resulting in dangerous biological and developmental delays.

In addition, researchers are recognizing the importance of supporting adults who themselves may have experienced neglect or other adversity early in life. Intervention with adults who lacked these relationships themselves can help them in giving their own children the tools they need to be brain healthy.

Simple serve-and-return interactions make everyday moments with our children fun and enriching. They allow us to build the foundation for our children’s lifelong learning, good behavior, and good brain health, while giving them the skills for facing life’s challenges.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Back-and-forth interactions, or serve and return, between you and a child can help create a strong foundation for future learning. The BHI, the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#), and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child suggest these simple ways to practice serve and return.

- **Notice what grabs a child's attention.** Pay attention to what the child focuses on and look for opportunities to share these moments. It will help you learn about the child's abilities, interests, and needs. These interactions can help your child explore the world and strengthen the bond between the two of you.
- **Be supportive.** When interacting with a child, acknowledge what he or she is doing. Your responses reward the child's interests and curiosity. Getting no reaction can be stressful for the child, so responding with encouragement lets the child know that his or her thoughts and feelings are heard and understood.
- **Name it.** When you return a child's serve, name what it is that you are seeing, doing, or feeling. This interaction helps form important language connections in the child's brain, even before he or she can talk or even understand your words. For example, if a child points to his or her feet, you can also point to them and say: "Those are your feet!" When you give things a name you help the child understand the world and what to expect.
- **Take turns.** After you return the serve, give the child a chance to respond. Children need time to form their responses and allowing time to respond helps the child to develop ideas, build confidence, and learn independence.
- **Let interactions occur naturally.** Your child will let you know when they are ready to move on to a new activity. By letting the child take the lead, you support them in exploring their world — and you make more serve and return interactions possible.
- Encourage your child to **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Meaning and Purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
 - Engaging with nature
 - General health
 - Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).