

## Education

### School readiness and early childhood interactions

We spoke to Dr Denise A Miller, Editor of Educational and Child Psychology and advocate for early childhood development, about her involvement in the Start for Life, Little Moments Together campaign.

11 March 2025

By [BPS Communications](#)

### Can you tell us about the Start for Life Campaign?

The [Start for Life 'Little Moments Together' campaign](#) is a government-led initiative by the Department for Education (DfE) in collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). It aims to raise awareness of the importance of everyday interactions between parents and their children within the early years. All the chatting, playing and reading they enjoy together has a huge impact on their child's development, helping them to be happy, to make friends easily and get on well at school.

### Why is this campaign important?

90 per cent of a child's brain growth happens before the age of five, yet many children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, start school without the expected level of communication and social skills.

Research from Start for Life, an early years communications programme that provides trusted NHS advice during pregnancy and for the first five years of your child's life, found 80 per cent of parents are unaware of this milestone, and what part they play in helping to build their child's brain. The campaign seeks to equip parents and caregivers with simple, everyday activities that can significantly support brain development and school readiness.

### Why is early childhood development so important for school readiness?

Research shows that children who start school with strong communication, language, and social skills are better equipped for academic success. However, data from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) 2021/22 shows that 36.6 per cent of children do not meet [expected levels in communication and literacy by age five](#). These challenges are particularly evident in socio-economically disadvantaged groups, where children may experience barriers, such as limited access to [early childhood education, linguistic challenges, and economic pressures](#).

## **What is 'serve and return' and how does it help a child's development?**

The Start for Life campaign emphasises the 'serve and return' model, a scientifically proven approach where a child initiates an interaction (the serve), and the adult responds (the return). This process strengthens [neural connections and fosters early learning](#). This means that talking and listening, reading together, engaging in imitative play, and responding to a child's curiosity all contribute to early development. These daily interactions create meaningful connections that support communication, social-emotional growth, and cognitive skills, that ultimately lay a strong foundation for school readiness.

## **What can parents and caregivers do to support early learning at home?**

The great thing about early learning is that it does not require expensive toys or structured intervention programmes. It can happen naturally in everyday moments. For instance:

1. Naming objects while shopping. Pointing out and naming fruits, vegetables, or items on the shelves.
2. Singing and repeating rhymes and songs with gestures to reinforce rhythm and vocabulary.
3. Reading aloud and asking questions. Encouraging predictions and discussing pictures in books.
4. Playing "I Spy" and taking turns to describe and guess objects based on colours, shapes, or sounds.
5. Mimicking baby coos or toddler phrases and adding new words.
6. Using words to describe feelings during different situations.
7. Having back-and-forth conversations through characters or puppets.

These simple everyday interactions can help to support a child's language, vocabulary, and communication skills while fostering their school readiness.

The [Start for Life website](#) offers free, practical resources for parents, caregivers, and educators on how to integrate early learning and resilience-building into everyday life.