

Coaching: Games & Practices for 4-7 year olds: Tee Ball, Rookie, & Coach Pitch Division Baseball & Softball

This note summarizes how to run a game and a good practice for a lower division baseball team (4-7 year olds), including drills, what to focus on in games, safety, and general advice from the collective experience of WDLL coaches.

Prioritize teaching athleticism, balance, and control above perfect form. Children want to emulate the ballplayers they see on TV, but they aren't always the best imitators! Proper body mechanics lead to better performance. Keep the kids loose but focused through teaching that everyone has a job on every play. Most importantly, stay safe and have fun!

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I. Teaching the Four Main Skills: Things to Know

A. Batting:

- a. Four steps: Stance, Focus (eye on ball), Swing, Follow-thru
- b. *Stance:*
 - i. Feet in straight line to pitcher, shoulder width apart
 - ii. Knees slightly bent
 - iii. Front foot even with side point of plate (to connect with ball in front of the player).
 - iv. Front foot 3 steps (each the player's shoe length) from plate.
 - v. Check: A level bat swung with arms fully extended should hit center of plate in widest part of bat. *Kids tend to stand too close to a tee, and too far from plate in coach pitch.*
 - vi. Check foot placement after every swing. EVERY swing!
 - vii. *Recommendation:* Mark a perpendicular 'toe line' and a 'midline' in the batter box dirt that shows batter where to line up: Body over 'midline', toes on 'toe line', so batter is in correct position to hit ball near end of bat with arms fully extended.
- c. *How to hold the bat:*
 - i. Front hand goes below back hand in grip
 - ii. Hands together, no space between them.
 - iii. Knuckles should be lined up (roughly is OK)

- iv. Bat slightly off shoulder, mostly vertical. Do not wrap bat around head or lay 'flat' – makes swing slow and inaccurate.
 - v. Bat steady, no movement stance ('wiggling' the bat is for the pros to distract a pitcher. Not for little leaguers).
- d. *Focus.*
- i. *Tee Ball:* Place ball on T with same position every time – e.g., a red letter E on Easton balls – facing straight back. Tell batter: eyes on the (e.g.) red E on ball.
 - ii. *All levels:* Kids look away when batting, or blink as ball approaches plate. Head stays down thru swing. Correct every time if batter looks up early during swing.
 - iii. *Teaching focus at coach pitch level:* Put a black dime-size dot on half of the baseballs. After each pitch ask the batter if the ball had a dot on it. When they report which do and which don't consistently, they've got their focus down. Kids like this. Do first without swings, then with swinging at the pitch.
- e. *Swing.*
- i. Short step (the 'stride') with front foot. Back foot stays planted.
 - ii. Swing down then level across.
 - iii. Head down, chin moves from touching front to back shoulder
 - iv. Rotate hips 'open' to face pitcher. Belt toward 2nd base
 - v. Front leg locked (straight) at point of ball contact
- f. *Follow-thru.*
- i. Swing hard thru ball, not just 'to' ball
 - ii. 'Squash the bug' with full 90-degree turn of back foot. Back toes still in place firmly on ground.
 - iii. Head down on plate, not looking up at pitcher or hit ball.
 - iv. Finish with hands between shoulder and top of head
 - v. Check swing with three things in follow thru: balance, two hands on bat, head down facing plate

B. Throwing:

- a. The throwing habits/skills you teach a 4-7 year old will stay with him/her, and affect their lifelong play, more than anything else you teach them. Here are the essentials of good throwing:
- b. The grip:
 - i. Teach kids to grip the ball with fingers, instead of grabbing the ball in the palm.
 - ii. Tee age: three fingers on top, spread out, pinky tucked on side. Thumb on bottom.
 - iii. Bigger handed kids thru adults use first two fingers on top, thumb on bottom.
- c. Proper mechanics of the throw:
 - i. Body starts sideways to target

- ii. Arms fully extended out in a 'T': front (gloved) hand points at target, back (ball) hand straight back, thumb pointing down
 - iii. Circular motion above shoulder to throw
 - iv. Throwing elbow should go above shoulder, arm in L-shape at apex of throw.
 - v. Follow thru with whole body, arm comes across as body turns. Back leg comes across front as weight shifts during release.
 - vi. Throwing, not pushing the ball!
 - vii. Eyes on target entire time.
- d. Watch for:
- i. Side-arm throwers. Intervene and correct this. Rotator cuff injuries are ahead for a kid who releases to side of body (as he/she gets older). Motion is also difficult to repeat consistently.
 - ii. 'Low elbow' throwers. Produces elbow injuries over time if not corrected. Elbow goes above shoulder when throwing.

C. Catching:

- a. Focus of catching training at 4-7 year old level: Catch every ball with two hands on glove in the center of body.
- b. Glove position:
 - i. Throw to kids at (their) chest height
 - ii. Teach players to catch with glove fingers pointing up or sideways, and other hand on back of glove (to help squeeze it). This shifts to one-handed as their hand strength develops age 8-10, not before then.
 - iii. 'Squeeze and freeze': After (if!) the ball enters the glove, squeeze with both hands and 'freeze' the hands (momentarily) in place. Kids tend to 'move' hands when catching, which makes the ball pop out. (Tell parents to show how pros catch at 1st base on television. Glove is motionless at the point when he catches the ball).
- c. For very early catchers:
 - i. Start with two handed catches without a glove. If child can't catch a soft underhand toss from 5' with two bare hands most of the time, that eye-hand coordination must be developed to that level before a baseball glove will be helpful.
 - ii. Ask parents to work on this each week for 15 min (say, 2x week) with their child. More is better. Catching comes with (and only with) practice, practice, practice.
- d. For kids 'scared of the ball'
 - i. Kids may be 'scared' of incoming ball at any speed. This is expected for balls at high speed. It is a problem to overcome if exhibited for soft, easy tosses.
 - ii. Correct this early. Teach player: If scared, use glove to block ball. The glove will stop the ball. Don't hide from it – then you can't see where it is!
 - iii. Tips to help overcome this: Practice with a variety of other balls eventually advancing to the game ball. Wiffle Balls, tennis balls, and foam balls offer

different levels of difficulty, but do not cause injury. Practice both barehanded and glove catches. Work with throws to the chest as well as pop ups. The goal is to gradually realize that the best defense is to catch the ball with your glove!

- e. About gloves:
 - i. Should be rounded shape, not flat.
 - ii. 9-10" gloves recommended. Anything larger tends to be too heavy
 - iii. Keep a ball in glove when not in use (maintains shape).
 - iv. Keep gloves in a cool, dry place.
 - v. Be good to your glove and it will be good to you!

D. Fielding Grounders

- a. Basic mechanics:
 - i. Body is always facing the play
 - ii. Shuffle side to side to get to the ball
 - iii. Field ball in front of and between legs
 - iv. Make a 'triangle' between two feet and glove
 - v. Attack the ball with glove, scooping motion
 - vi. Funnel ball with two hands into mid-section ('catch and cover')
 - vii. Come up ready to throw, feet in line with target.
- b. General points:
 - i. Teach kids to charge the ball if it is slow/rolling (but closest person gets it!)
 - ii. Hopping balls are difficult. Teach by tossing one-hoppers to kids from 10 feet out. Requires a field not too uneven. (Parents can teach this in a parking lot or on pavement during the week, which helps and is easier to field)
 - iii. Fielding ground balls requires repetition. Teach with rolled balls for long time before hitting to them kids.

II. Running a Practice: Things to know

- A. Plan. Have a plan for practice, and pay attention to time. Plans can be just scratched out in the car on the way over, or follow the sample plan provided below (item III).
- B. Training the parents. Start & end on time. If you start on time, parents will (more frequently) show up on time too. Enlist as many of them as possible to help with pre-practice setup, in-practice supervision, post-practice cleanup, and, of course, post-game snacks!
- C. Pacing. Kids this age have high energy but low stamina. Vary the high effort (running) and lower effort (throwing) activities every 10 min or so.
- D. Start fast. Kids are full of energy when they arrive, too much to focus on a coach talking about the game. Start with short stretching and a high physical activity next, such as running the bases.
- E. Water breaks. Pay attention to water breaks when it gets hot. Many short water breaks are better than one longer one.

- F. Names. Re-introduce / go over players' names to start every practice. You and they need to know everyone's names to make practice fun.
- G. Base running advice: Run bases in the correct direction. Always.
- H. Baseball hustle. Teach kids to run ('hustle') every time coach calls them in, sends them out to the field, whatever. The pros always run out to their position!
- I. Break time. Check with parents so they know where to be next week, address their questions, and the like.

III. A Sample 60 - minute Practice Layout

A. Team Meeting (5 min)

- a. First practice – distribute uniforms, game schedule, field maps
- b. Player's & coaches names – do every practice to start
- c. Explain today's program

B. Warm up and base running (10 min)

- a. Jog around bases
- b. Stretch as a team (2 min) with coach
- c. Run bases – fast, but one base at a time, on coaches' mark

C. Throwing (10 min)

- a. Demonstrate grip –1 min
- b. Show / reshow correct body position and 4 throwing steps (turn, point, step, and throw) – 1 min
- c. "Bonk the bucket" game with whole team

D. Split into two groups for batting and fielding (10 min)

- a. Batting: One coach takes half the players to outfield:
 - i. Do 5-10 hits/player (as time allows),
 - ii. 1-1 or 1-2 instruction with each batter
 - iii. Other batters field the hits while waiting turn
- b. Fielding: Other coach works with rest of team on one of:
 - i. Fielding grounders:
 1. Roll ground balls to players.
 2. Show right glove position (down low, out in front)
 3. Charge the ball, catch and cover with other hand
 4. Throw to coach (pretend coach is at 1st)
 5. "Hustle" game
 - ii. Catching balls:
 1. Toss from coaches to players
 2. Players line up 2-arms length apart, facing coach
 3. Glove in front of chest, fingers up or sideways
 4. 'Squeeze and freeze' when catching
 5. "Count" game (easy) or "Ball Relays" (advanced)

E. Reverse the two groups (10 min) - coaches stay at same spots!

F. Positions instruction and closing (5 min)

- a. Run "Break" game to teach positions, cool down before end.

Variations & notes on the sample practice plan:

- Use multiple smaller groups whenever enough help is available.
- Use batting tees for players to get multiple reps. NO ONE is too old for a batting tee. Mike Trout hits off a tee during practice!
- Close with a whole-team activity like the "Break" game. Player positions are a great thing to review as the last item in practice at this age.
- There is never enough time to teach batting, being a one-on-one thing and only one tee. The kids look forward to this the most, usually.
- After 2-3 practices, kids will know your basic practice plan and you will have time to teach a few more skills at each station.

Here are useful extensions to work into your practices over time:

- Running right: Players run on balls of feet, not on heels, in baseball (and sprinting generally). Kids call this 'toe running'.
- Base running: teach to run thru 1st B, turn outside, then return. But you must stop on the bag at @ 2nd, 3rd.
- Fielding: Spread players out and roll/hit to them without calling their names (teaches focus). Teach: closest person gets it. Have them throw to another parent/coach standing where 1st should be. Speed up so they're always on their toes.
- Fielding: Switch to 'hopping' ground balls with better players, rather than rolling them on ground. Start with light 1 hop (1 bounce) tosses that go knee/thigh high and have kids catch & cover those (yes, its hard for them on the 1st day, but most are amazing good at this by the 3rd time they practice it)
- Fielding: Switch from the coach rolling balls to the coach hitting balls (gently) part-way thru the season.
- Catching: With better players, switch to low throws every other toss so kids learn to 'switch' from glove-up to glove-down based on incoming ball height (tough for them at tee-ball age, easier as they age and coordination improves).

IV. Five Useful Practice Drills ("Games")

Bonk the Bucket

- Put an empty bucket upright on a tee (take out neck insert first).
- Line up players between 1st & 3rd base across pitcher position
- Players throw at bucket simultaneously. Kids like this game.

Recommendations:

- Roll balls out to all players, have them find grip, then wait for coach;
- On coach's words, players: TURN, POINT, STEP, and THROW at the bucket. Pace appropriately for your team.
- Big cheer if anyone hits the bucket. They like this. Really.

- Ass't coach helps correct kids who need 1-1 help with mechanics, body position, and so on during this drill.

This drill teaches:

- Throwing accuracy (essential to baseball at any level)
- Throwing mechanics & 'muscle memory' of correct throws.
- Listening to coach & instructions
- Success.

Hustle ("Charge It") Game

- Line up players single file, or in two parallel lines if a parent is available as well
- Roll balls to players, have them field it, throw to coach, and return to end of line.
- Fast moving. Many skills/lessons to teach here (below)

Recommendations:

- Teach to 'catch & cover' ball when fielding grounders, then stand and throw.
- No diving on ball – field it on two feet!
- Players should charge short or slow-moving balls. Do many to teach this. If two lines & even # of players, make a game of which line can field all its grounders first without an overthrow back to coach.
- Coaches should have a pile of balls at feet. Let overthrows go. Keep it moving fast.
- With weak players, roll balls gently. Better players: Roll faster, or throw hopping grounders.
- Mark a 'start' line for players (or they will creep up to you fast). Use balls, or a bat, to mark where they start.
- On throws, emphasize correct progression (turn, point, step, throw)

This drill teaches:

- Focus: Anticipating a ball's movement
- Agility / body movement / balance
- Where to throw after fielding a ball (1st base!)

Count Game

- A simple catching game. Line up players arms-length apart, all facing a coach.
- Coach underhand tosses a ball lightly to each player in succession (switch to overhand after a few practices / when they are ready)
- Count # of consecutive catches, and see how high the team can get. Restart at 1 after anyone drops ball. Try to get to a higher number than best one from last practice.

Recommendations:

- Start only 5' away from players. Move back as season progresses.
- All throws to player's chest (above waist!) for first few weeks. Then switch to throws to right, to left, or higher 'pop-up' catches
- Emphasize: Correct glove position. 'Squeeze and freeze' on catches.

This drill teaches:

- Eye / hand coordination.
- Proper way to catch a ball (body in front, 'freeze' on catch, squeeze glove tight on catch with other hand on back of glove helping to squeeze – important at this age).

Ball Relays

- A more advanced throwing/catching game after the "count game" has worn thin and players can throw somewhat reliably.
- Divide players evenly into two groups (say, 4 each). Position in two parallel lines, each player about 10-20' apart.
- Place a ball at the foot of two players at one end of the lines.
- On coaches mark: Players pick up ball, throw to next player in their line, who throws to next player, ... to last player in line, who returns throw to player he/she received it from, who throws back to next player in line in reverse order, and so on back to starting player.
- Whichever line completes drill first wins. Kids like this game.
- Then switch 2 players between the lines to 'even' teams out, and repeat.

Recommendations:

- On overthrows: Closest player gets it, then must throw back to thrower, who must make a good throw to continue relay.
- Teach kids to pause and aim (point glove arm out) for accuracy before throwing ball
- Start with kids close (10' or so), spread out as they get better.
- Pay attention that both lines have same spacing, it is unfair if otherwise and kids will realize it.

This drill teaches:

- Throwing accuracy
- Focus and attention
- Catching / eye-hand coordination
- Turn-around time matters

"Break" Game (learning field positions)

- A simple 5-min game to teach players where to stand properly in the field, to be in 'ready position', and to hustle out and in.
- Assemble team around coach at pitcher's mound.
- Have team close their eyes. Tell them to remember their position.
- Tap a child's head and say a unique position (e.g., 3rd base, center field, catcher, and so on). Continue thru team quickly.
- When everyone has a unique position, say "Break"
- Kids hustle (run) to their positions and assume 'ready position' (hands on knees, or hand in glove at mid-waist like pros, ready for the ball).
- See if everyone gets it right. Correct mis-positions (e.g., teach that 2nd doesn't play on the bag, but halfway between 1st and 2nd).
- Call them in, and repeat with new position assignments.
- Run this game fast, it takes only 5 min to do it 5 times.

Recommendations:

- Kids this age have trouble with right-versus-left. Teach: Right is behind first, left behind third. Or for righties, use: Right is your throwing hand side.
- As kids get better (after 3-4 practices): Teach correct infield fielding positions. For 1st & 3rd: Play 5 steps in and 3 steps back (approximately right for kids this age.) For SS & 2nd,

play 5 steps off 2nd base and 3 steps back. Use assistant coaches to help outfielders find right positions when they wander and forget.

- Enthusiasm for whole team's success when they all get it right.
- Kids will forget what you told them the first few times. By later practices, they will pay attention and rarely forget. It works, really.

This drill teaches:

- Visualization / spatial positioning / memory.
- Attention to the coach's instructions.
- Right versus left.
- Hustle to-from assignments.

V. Running a Game: Things to know

A. Pre-game:

- a. Know the rules for your division's games (are there strike outs? Walks? etc).
- b. Have a player rotation scheme for the field (see below)
- c. Visiting team bats first
- d. Base layout is 45' apart for Tee-Ball and Rookie, and 60' apart for Coach Pitch
- e. Bats on bat rack, away from dugout area

B. On offense / batting:

- a. Have a batting order and follow it.
- b. In tee ball, coach at the box. One coach stays near the batting box, placing the ball on tee, helping (as needed) with stance, encouragement, and ensuring bat safety.
- c. All ages: Kids seated in batting order in dugout area. This speeds the game, shows parents you are organized, and limits the goofing around.
- d. Bat around rules. All players bat each inning in Tee, and Rookies unless team size dictates otherwise.
- e. Announce when your last batter is up. In Tee and Rookies, the last batter "clears" the bases.
- f. Bat safety. No child picks up a bat unless he/she is told to do so by the coach. No on-deck bat swinging in Little League.

C. On defense / in the field:

- a. Set kids in correct field positions every inning (or every two innings). Even if it takes an extra minute or two. If you have 10 players, these are: P, 1st, 2nd, SS, 3rd, RF, RC, CF, LC, and LF. Outfielders play short, covering the holes between the infielders.
- b. Teach them the right positions and reset them if they wander around the field chasing the ball.
- c. Rotate player positions frequently (not just each game). Remember, coaches assign positions, not kids or parents!
- d. Start field positions differently each week so everyone gets a chance at all positions as the season progresses. Parents will notice if their kid never got a chance at 1st, etc., as the season progresses. Try to set positions for each inning prior to the game if possible.

- e. Ready positions. Encourage players to be in **"baseball/softball ready"** position (hand on knees, eyes on batter) before each batter hits.
- f. Coaches stand on field during games, encouraging baseball ready positions, reminding fielders where to throw the ball, etcetera.
- g. Emphasize the "closest person gets it" fielding rule. Constantly. This is a safety rule, and is good baseball. In Tee, it may be necessary to call out a player's name when you feel the ball is theirs.
- h. Plays. Throws go to 1st base. Make sure the 1st base fielder is watching the ball, not the sky, grass, so s/he is ready to receive the throw.

D. Player rotation in the field:

Coaches may have different strategies for this. Some common methods below:

- a. Rotate players every batter, or every 3rd batter (say), using the 'Snake' scheme: RF->RCF->LCF->LF->3B->SS->2B->1B->P->C->RF ...
- b. Rotate players every inning, using the 'in then out' rule (switching infield and outfield positions, moving 'over' one infield position each time). Works well with 10 players (5 infield, 5 out).
- c. 'Schedules' or pre-set rotation schemes. Coach tells players where to go each inning, rotating in-then-out each inning. Takes an extra minute or two, but kids learn your scheme fast.

E. End of game/closing

- a. All games end with teams meeting on the field to shake hands or tip caps
- b. Snack time. Teams should "circle up" for a 5 min snack-time (parent provided) after a game. Use this time to remind parents of upcoming events (games, practices, pictures, fundraisers, etc.)
- c. Say what players did that was good that game. Positive feedback has a tremendous impact on 4-7 year olds' enthusiasm and enjoyment of the game, especially from a potential "authority" figure like a coach.
- d. Home coach must groom fields clean up trash, and put away equipment after games. Enlist parents to help!

VI. What Players Should Know as They Advance to Kid Pitch

- A. All of the positions and (roughly) where to stand when playing each
- B. Their own batting stance and body mechanics (which side do they stand on, which hand do they throw with, etc.)
- C. Baserunning: when to run through bag, when to stop on bag, when to make a turn, where to stand when on base, head up while running!
- D. Swinging through the ball, resetting feet after each swing.
- E. Attacking/charging the ball in the field
- F. Communication with teammates
- G. Focus/Awareness. The game is way more interesting than playing in the dirt!