



Your primary objective as a youth baseball or softball coach should be to develop well-rounded players. You can accomplish this goal by letting them play many positions; teaching them the fundamental skills, rules and strategies; and introducing them to values, life lessons, and the importance of leading an active lifestyle. Chapter 6 from the Babe Ruth League Coaching Education and Certification Program offered by ASEP deals with teaching and shaping skills.

CHAPTER 6 - TEACHING AND SHAPING SKILLS

Teaching Baseball Skills:

Many people believe that the only qualification needed to teach a skill is to have performed it. It's helpful to have performed it, but successful teaching requires much more than that. And even if you haven't played much baseball, softball or performed some of the skills you must help young players develop, you can still teach the game effectively:

- **Place your players in small groups to introduce the skill to them.** Players, especially young and inexperienced ones, need to know what skill they are learning and why they are learning it. When you put players in small groups and rotate them to various stations every 15 to 20 minutes, you can keep them moving, maintain their interest, and give them some of the individual feedback they need to improve. Take the following steps every time you introduce a new skill to your players:
 - **Get your players' attention.**
 - **Name the skill.**
 - **Demonstrate the proper way to execute the drill.**
 - **Introduce key buzzwords or phrases to help players remember the skill.**
 - **Explain why it is important to perform the skill a certain way.**
- **Get your Players' Attention.** Because youngsters are easily distracted, use some method to get their attention. Some coaches use interesting news items or stories. Others use jokes. And still others project enthusiasm to get their players to listen. Whatever method you use, speak slightly above the normal volume and look your players in the eye when you speak. Make sure they understand they are not allowed to talk or otherwise distract their teammates when a coach is talking. Be sure to position your players so they can see and hear you.
- **Name the Skill.** Although you might mention other common names for the skill, decide on one and stick with it. This helps avoid confusion and enhances communication among your players.
- **Demonstrate the Proper Way to Perform the Skill.** Most of us are visual learners. We need more than simple instructions to master a skill. Being able to demonstrate the skill you are trying to teach is important when attempting to successfully explain a skill. It is usually easier for young players to imitate someone than to absorb a lot of information.

One caution: Young players have short attention spans, so a long demonstration or explanation of a skill may bore them. So spend no more than a few minutes altogether on the introduction, demonstration, and explanation phases. Then get the players active in a drill that helps teach them how to perform the skills. Drills can eventually be turned into games or contests.

Introduce key buzzwords or phrases to help players remember the skill. Young children often use word association to study for tests or absorb educational materials. The same method is effective when teaching proper baseball or softball skills. Samples include: *loose hands, quick bat* (goal of Soft Toss Drill); *you have to go back to go forward* (weight shift when hitting); *five links of the chain* (pitching mechanics); *get the ball down, out and up* (power position); and *wide base, butt down, hands in front* (routine ground ball fielding position).

- **Explain Why to Perform the Skill a Certain Way.** “Why” is a young person’s favorite question. As a coach, if you are able to explain why a skill should be performed a certain way, you gain instant credibility. Also, a young player is much more likely to try it that way than if you just tell them that they should do it because you are their coach and you know best. Also, if a young player understands why a skill is attempted a certain way, even if he or she can’t execute the skill right away, at some point a play will happen in a game and he or she will naturally approach it correctly.
- **Attend to Players Practicing the Skill.** Some players may need to be physically guided through the movements during their first few attempts. Walking unsure athletes through the skill in this way will help them gain confidence to perform the skill on their own. Your teaching duties don’t end when all of your athletes have demonstrated that they understand how to perform the skill exactly the way you taught them. In fact, a significant part of your teaching involves observing them as they improve and helping them stay on task when they don’t perform the skill exactly the way you taught them. Remember, too, that players sometimes need individual instruction. If possible, try to set aside a time before, during, or after practice to give individual help when it is needed.

Shaping Players’ Skills:

One of your principal teaching duties is to reward positive behavior – in terms of successful skill execution – when you see it. A player hits the ball hard in practice and you immediately say, “That’s the way to keep your head in there! Good swing!” This, plus a smile and a thumbs-up gesture goes a long way toward reinforcing a particular technique with that player.

Sometimes, however, you may have a long dry spell before you have any correct technique to reinforce. How can you shape their skills in this case? Shaping skills takes practice on the part of your players and patience on your part. Please know it is normal to get frustrated at times when teaching skills. Instead of getting upset, use the following guidelines for shaping skills:

- **Think Small Initially.** Reward the first signs of behavior that approximate what you are looking for. Then reward closer and closer approximations. In short, use your reward power to shape the behavior you seek. Celebrate small victories with enthusiasm.
- **Break Skills into Small Steps.** For instance, in learning to field ground balls and then throwing after the catch, one of your players does well as far as getting in proper fielding position and watching the ball into the glove, but doesn’t shuffle his or her feet toward the target or follow the throw after releasing it. Reinforce the correct techniques of getting into proper position and watching the ball into the glove, and teach him or her how to shuffle in the proper direction and prepare to throw. When he or she masters that, focus on getting them to complete the skill by following the throw toward the target after releasing it.
- **Develop One Component of a Skill at a Time.** Don’t try to shape two components of a skill at once. Athletes who have problems mastering a skill often do so because they’re trying to improve two or more components at once. Help these athletes to isolate a single component.
- **As Athletes Become More Proficient at a Skill, Reinforce Them Only Occasionally and Only for the Best Examples of the Skill Behavior.** When you focus only on the best examples, you will help them

continue to improve once they've mastered the basics, and they will begin to understand the difference between doing something satisfactorily and doing it exceptionally.

- **When Athletes are trying to Master a New Skill, Temporarily Relax your Standards for How you Reward Them.** As they focus on the new skill or attempt to integrate it with other skills, the old well-learned skills may temporarily degenerate. As this happens, remind them of the buzzwords and demonstrate all aspects of the new and old skills.
- **If a Well-Learned Skill Degenerates for Long, try to Restore it by Going Back to the Basics.**

Detecting And Correcting Errors:

Good coaches recognize that athletes make two types of errors: learning errors and performance errors. Learning errors are the ones that occur because athletes don't know how to perform a skill; that is, they have not yet developed the correct motor program in the brain to perform a particular skill. Performance errors are made not because athletes don't know how to do the skill, but because they make a mistake in executing what they do know.

- **Correct One Error at a Time.**
- **Use Positive Feedback to Correct Errors.** The positive approach to correcting errors includes emphasizing what to do instead of what not to do.
 - **Praise effort and correct performance.** Praise your athlete for trying to perform a skill correctly and for performing parts of it correctly. Do this immediately after he or she performs the skill, if possible. Keep the praise simple and sincere.
 - **Give Simple and Precise Feedback.** Don't burden a player with a long or detailed explanation of how to correct an error. Give just enough feedback so the player can correct one error at a time. For errors that are complicated to explain and difficult to correct, explain and demonstrate what the athlete should have done, explain the cause(s) of the error and why you are recommending the correction, if it isn't obvious.
 - **Make Sure the Athlete Understands the Feedback so They Can Correct the Error.** Ask him or her to repeat the feedback and to explain and demonstrate how it will be used again. If the athlete cannot do this, be patient and present your feedback again. Then have the athlete repeat the feedback after you're finished.
 - **Provide an Environment that Motivates the Athlete to Improve.** Your players won't always be able to correct their errors immediately, even if they understand your feedback. Encourage them to hang in there and stick with it. Remind them it will take time, and the improvement will happen only if they work at it. Make a concerted effort to encourage players with low self-esteem. Some athletes need more outside motivation to improve.

Running a Fun and Efficient Practice:

We've all seen it. We drive by a local baseball or softball field during a youth practice and it doesn't look like much fun. An adult is pitching, one player is batting, another player is on deck, and the rest of the team is in the field. The only person that looks interested is the batter. Unfortunately, this scenario plays out more often than not on baseball and softball fields across America. It's easy to see why over the last 10 to 15 years many kids have gotten bored with baseball and softball. One of the big problems right now is that the game, as currently structured, is not very fun for even the youngest players.

Volunteer coaches are not to blame for the decline in baseball or softball participation or for the lack of excitement that kids seem to find in the game. Most times, coaches are not armed with the materials and knowledge they need about the game itself, motor development and child psychology. Sometimes one designated practice time and one game time a week are assigned to each team. Other times, there might be two games a week and no practices. Games don't offer many learning opportunities, so it stands to reason

that even at the youngest ages, practices are extremely important. Practices, if handled correctly, provide the opportunity to interact with players individually or in small groups, to develop individual motor skills, to teach the basic rules of the game, and to understand what it means to be part of a team. Practices can be as much fun as or even more fun than games.

Use Small Groups and Stations:

It's twice as easy and productive to be able to work with a group of 6 or 7 as opposed to an entire team of 12 or 15. Likewise, it's easier to work with a group of 3 versus a group of 6. To teach baseball or softball effectively, you must make the practices as interactive as possible by using a variety of drills or stations and breaking the kids down into small groups. The key is to develop stations that cover age-appropriate instructional goals. After a few minutes, the groups should rotate to a new drill or station. It is also important to keep the drills and stations creative.

Let Players Determine Practice Length:

Most youth leagues seem to schedule practices in 1-hour time blocks. This may turn out to be way too long for the T-batters or a little too short for the 12-year-olds. Regardless, you will be able to tell by the kids' body language and ability to pay attention when a practice has run its course. As players get older, their passion for the game and attention spans are likely to increase. It is okay to adjust practice times accordingly. Even as players progress up the ranks into high school, you need to monitor practice length. Players 7-9 will begin to learn team concepts; however, the amount of time spent on these concepts should be limited. As players get older, team fundamentals and drills become more important. (Remember that throwing, catching and hitting are the basic building blocks of the game and should be practiced every day.) Coaches of older and more advanced players will spend more time on team fundamentals such as bunt defenses, cutoffs, and relays, first-and-third defenses, communication, and so on.

Warming Up:

Many times a coach shows up and immediately tells the team to run around the bases. As players get older they begin to understand that this activity is a warm-up. They know what it means to jog and get loose. Younger players usually do not grasp this concept. They view it as a race and run as hard as they can in an effort to finish first. Others push themselves to the very end and exhaust their energy. Either way, you are going to have a bunch of tired kids. A better idea for younger ages is to open practice with base running. Kids love to run bases. As players get older (over 13) you can introduce and explain the concept of a dynamic warm-up, including jogging, running, bounding, skipping, high knees and so on. Cold muscles should never be stretched, but it is important to introduce a stretching routine to any age group. Generating a flow of blood to the muscles *before* stretching is essential to prevent injury.

Having a Plan:

It is important for a coach to spend some time in advance putting the day's practice on paper. If you can come to practice with a plan and can communicate and organize the plan effectively while the team stretches, the confidence level of the players and parents will increase, and the practice will run more efficiently.

Dealing With Misbehavior:

Athletes will misbehave at times; it's only natural. Following are two ways you can respond to misbehavior: through extinction or discipline.

- **Extinction.** Ignoring misbehavior – neither rewarding nor disciplining it – is called extinction. This technique can be effective under certain circumstances. In some situations, disciplining young people's misbehavior only encourages them to act up further because of the recognition they get. Ignoring

misbehavior teaches youngsters that it is not worth your attention. Sometimes you cannot wait for a behavior to fizzle out. When players cause danger to themselves or others or they disrupt the activities of others, you need to take immediate action. Extinction works best in situations in which players seek recognition through mischievous behaviors, clowning, or grandstanding. Usually, if you are patient, their failure to get your attention will cause the behavior to disappear.

- **Discipline.** Some educators say we should never discipline young people, but should only reinforce their positive behaviors. It is true that discipline does not always work and that it can create problems when used ineffectively. But when used appropriately, discipline is effective in eliminating undesirable behaviors without creating other undesirable consequences.
 - Discipline in a corrective way to help athletes improve now and in the future.
 - Impose discipline in an impersonal way when athletes break team rules. Shouting or scolding indicates that your attitude is one of revenge.
 - Once a good rule has been agreed on, ensure that athletes who violate it will experience the unpleasant consequences of their misbehavior. It is okay to warn an athlete once before disciplining.
 - Be consistent in administering discipline.
 - Don't discipline using consequences that may cause you guilt.
 - Once the discipline is completed, don't make athletes feel they are in the doghouse. Make them feel that they're valued members of the team again.
 - Never discipline athletes for making physical errors when they play.
 - Never use physical activity - running laps or doing push-ups - as discipline. To do so only causes athletes to resent physical activity.
 - Discipline sparingly. Constant discipline and criticism cause athletes to turn their interests elsewhere and to resent you as well.

Any coach who successfully passes the Babe Ruth League Coaching Education and Certification Program will receive a certification that is ***valid for their entire coaching career with Babe Ruth League, Inc.*** If you haven't already done so, please visit www.BabeRuthCoaching.org to gain your ***lifetime certification!***