

Techniques for Coaching Younger Children

One of the greatest rewards in life may very well be that of parenthood. Having the chance to watch your children grow from "demanding" infants to "demanding" teenagers may be life's greatest compensation. Perhaps second to that honor may be the distinction of being athletic coach to your son or daughter. The problem comes when it is not just your child, but 10-or-12 other children as well. Suddenly, there is a responsibility to many while you were struggling with parenting only one or two. Once you make the decision to coach, there is no other choice in the matter than to become something that you might not know how to be.

Take it from one who has been there that this is not as tough as it may seem. First thing to remember is always be yourself. You probably already know the best lesson to learn. The problem is that most of us do not remember being seven-years old and being taken from the safety of the backyard and placed with strangers on a field bigger than the imagination. Try to see yourself through those innocent eyes, so eagerly watching the coach's every move, and try to become his or her favorite coach. The idea of being a "good person with the kids" is what T-Ball is really all about. There are indeed rules to follow. Spend a few nights reading a book or two about basic ball playing; however, when putting it altogether in your mind, do so as a seven- or eight-year old.

A good rule of thumb is never attend practice in a shirt and tie. Young children take notice and place themselves at a disadvantage to the authority it implies. My dad goes to work wearing a shirt and tie, but when he comes home to play with me, he removes them. Wear blue jeans or shorts, but be prepared to get down on your knees and talk straight into their faces one-to-one. Get down to their level. Your best player might just take on the "Giant Killer" attitude. While a six-foot coach stands high above the child's three-foot frame, he or she may feel they will be swallowed up at the first mistake. They tend to turn their backs on the coach and hide any talent they may have. A good idea is to pick out two-or-three of the second-year players and befriend them. The fact that the younger player realizes the coach's interest in the older players without fear of retaliation will make him or her more acceptable to you and your "different from my dad" personality.

Above all, make coaching challenging for yourself and fun for the kids. Take a baseball and drill four holes into it. Get some "Mr. Potato Head" parts (eyes, nose and mouth) and build a "Mr. Smiley Baseball." Show it to the players, make it the team mascot. If they have parts to add, let them do so. Tell the players that "Smiley" needs ears, and that, like their mascot, they have to listen. Their mascot needs strong legs and quick feet as well. Always remind them that this is a game and that it must be fun to play. When it is not fun anymore, even you should get out and do something else.

Do not get too technical. Yeah, you must teach basics, but do it the way they would understand. Teach the "alligator." Never teach the technical way to field a ground ball. The "alligator" will accomplish the same thing. The alligator has a big mouth, and we use our hands like the alligator. The glove hand is the bottom of the alligator's mouth; the throwing hand is the top. Now get down low just like the alligator and keep your back

flat. Here comes the ball, let it roll to you. Put your glove on the ground like the alligator's mouth and with the top (throwing) hand, close those jaws down and lock that ball in your glove. Even teach them to growl while they close down the jaws. That will allow them to expend air and make the play much easier. It will also keep them from getting hurt. Follow the "alligator" with the "bird." Bring the hands to the middle of the chest and spread the wings (arms), with thumbs always downward. Flap the wings, crow hop and throw! This is not only fun, it is natural. It is basic and after a few short practice sessions, the players will be sort of fielding grounders, throwing close to first base and making many strange noises. They will be back next practice, next game, next year and who knows what could be next. ""Squash the bug, ring the bell, hit the ball and run like the wind!"

Never scold or criticize in front of the entire team. Take the child aside and show them what they did wrong. Start out by praising the player about something they do correctly and then emphasizing what to do next time. Wipe their tears when they cry and laugh with them (they will be amusing) as often as you laugh at them.

Always emphasize the need for parent-to-child relationships. Allow parents to watch your coaching techniques and ask them to drill 15 minutes each day on the things taught. As the coach, be a leader, a dad, a nurse and a best friend to the players. To the parents, be the boss. You must know when the child comes to practice or the game and when he or she is being taken home. Discuss parents' differences face-to-face only after practice, never over the telephone.

Be the coach and manager. Never bring the treats! That is for the parents to do. You reward them with high five's, handshakes, words of encouragement and above all, smiles. When a child gets a bump or bruise, be the first to his or her side. Make sure they know you care. Be sure to make practice fun and games competitive only to the point of competition itself-never for the sake of winning at all costs. Leave that must-win thing for Pony League and high school.

Good luck as head coach. I hope you enjoy coaching baseball as much as myself. I have countless memories to be thankful for and would never give up the chance to do it for all the money in the world.

About the author:

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