

Chapter 1

Teaching Baseball to Children

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If you've recently agreed to coach a youth baseball team, congratulations! You deserve credit for taking on the special role of volunteer baseball coach. You're about to embark on a one-of-a-kind journey that you and your players will remember for the rest of your lives. Your season will be packed with many special moments, coming from your midweek practices and your weekend games. If you're still pondering the decision on whether to coach, we hope that the picture we paint of youth baseball will make it enticing enough to prompt a commitment.

Before you step on the field with the kids, though, please be aware that you're assuming a position that will have a far-reaching impact on their lives. Your approach to the season — from the goals you put in place to how you interact with the kids during practices and games — impacts how your players will feel about themselves, the sport of baseball, and you. You can use your many job responsibilities to help the kids develop an unquenchable passion for the game. However, if you neglect or mishandle your responsibilities, you may smother their interest in ever swinging a bat again.

What you need to get your season headed in the right direction — and to keep it on course — is some quality information on all the different aspects of the game.

In this chapter, we spell out what it takes to build solid relationships with parents to get them working with you rather than against you, and we take a peek at the rules and terms that are a big part of the game. Equally important, we share some of the secrets of running fun-filled practices and managing the

game-day coaching basics, shed some light on managing the complex role of coaching your own child, and tip you off about some of the challenges you'll likely face.

Acknowledging Your Behind-the-Scenes Responsibilities

Chances are you volunteered to coach this season because you want to spend more time with your child; you want to be right there on the field introducing him to the great game of baseball. Or, maybe your local league is struggling to find coaches, and you came forward to help out because you love the game. Or, perhaps you just love working with kids, and you want to give coaching baseball a shot with the free time you have. Whatever your reasons, we applaud your enthusiasm and willingness to devote your time and energy to teaching kids.

Allow us to make the assumption that the biggest things on your mind are how to relate to your players, make them like you, and teach them the skills of the game. But before any youngster takes the field for his first practice under your direction, you have plenty of behind-the-scenes work to do — work that will ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start. In the following sections, we discuss the relationship you'll develop with your players' parents, and we explain the importance of knowing the rules and terminology of the game and the requirements of your league.

Working with parents

When coaching your players, you'll stress the importance of working together as a team. The same approach applies to dealing with parents. When coaches and parents find ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — you provide the formula that fuels a fun-filled season, in which the kids reap countless benefits. Most parents of children involved in youth baseball programs are wonderful, supportive, and caring and only want the best for their kids.

Of course, some parents can turn out to be sources of season-long aggravation who'll have you reaching for the aspirin. Disagreements over playing time, batting orders, or game strategy, for example, cast a negative shadow over the entire team. Being prepared to deal with all types of parents is the only remedy for preventing issues from detracting from the kids' enjoyment of the season. You can dodge many potential problems by gathering the

parents before you begin working with their kids so you can all get on the same page (see Chapter 4 for more on holding the preseason parents meeting).



Getting off on the right foot with the parents can be the springboard to a problem-free season. Keep the following tips in mind to help maintain order in your little baseball universe:

- ✓ **Outline your expectations.** Outlining your expectations for the parents and their kids, as well as going over your coaching methods, puts the season in focus and cuts down on the chance of a misunderstanding causing a major disruption. Keep in mind that many parents may be new to organized baseball; those in unfamiliar territory will appreciate the valuable information you share with them. During your preseason discussion, highlight what you want everyone to take away from the experience.

You can find advice for developing your all-important coaching philosophy in Chapter 2. We also stress the importance of knowing your league's policies and rules so that you can communicate them to the parents.

- ✓ **Include the parents.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's baseball experience, and the experience will be much more enjoyable for them and their youngster if you can find ways to include them on your season-long journey. They can do so much more than bring snacks and drinks to games. Do what you can to incorporate them into your practices, and recruit suitable parents to assist you on game day. Chapter 4 offers a variety of tips on boosting parental involvement, and Chapter 6 provides ideas for getting parents involved in the action on the field during practices.

- ✓ **Give them regular updates.** You should keep the lines of communication open all season long. Find time to talk to the parents about their child's progress; share your thoughts on areas of the game where the player is really making improvements; offer suggestions for things the parents can do to help their youngster's development; and check in to make sure the child is having fun playing for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and the best way to ensure positive experiences for all involved.



The key to diffusing negative situations with parents is to always remain in control of your emotions, regardless of how out of control the upset parent may be. Do your best to prevent situations from escalating. In Chapter 17, we present some of the more common problems that youth baseball coaches must deal with, and we offer the best approaches for solving them before they leave a negative imprint on the season.

Getting a handle on the rules and terminology

Not only do you need a good grasp of the basics of baseball, but you also have to be comfortable enough with them to be able to explain all the rules, popular terms, and strategies to your players. Relaying this information isn't as complicated as it may seem — especially for younger kids or even kids with a lot of experience — but it may require a quick refresher on your part to get up to speed on all the different areas that make up the great game of baseball.

We devote the bulk of Chapter 3 to helping you with all the different rules and options the game has in place for batting, running the bases, and playing in the field. We run down the key skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your players throughout Parts III and IV of this book. If you're new to the game, or if you simply want a quick review before you jump into coaching a beginning-level team, we have you covered. If you need more detailed information for working with a group of skilled kids who have played the game for years, you've picked up the right book; we include plenty of information to help you be an effective advanced-league coach, too.



You also need to know any special rules that your league has in place. The rules your league utilizes may vary from the rules you know, depending on the age and experience level of the players. Every detail, from the size of the field to what types of rules are enforced, can change from community to community. Knowing these rules — and being able to share them with your players and their parents — makes a tremendous difference in how smoothly your season runs. Check out Chapter 2 for more info on league-specific rules, and head to Chapter 4 to find out how to present the rules to your kids' parents.

Stepping onto the Field

Seeing the looks on your players' faces after they get pretty good at fielding ground balls, hitting fastballs or laying down bunts during practice is part of what makes coaching youth baseball so much fun. The more players learn from you during practice, the more they can transfer over to the field on game day. The following sections introduce how you can plan great practices and get you and your players ready for game day.



Keep in mind that what you say, and how you say it, has a significant impact on your players' development — from day one until the end of the season. You want to fuel the kids' passion and have them excited to get started when they arrive at practices or at games. Smiles, laughter, and enthusiasm are the signals that you're teaching the right way.

Planning and executing fun and effective practices

The practices you design influence how much learning takes place under your watch and how much fun your kids have playing for you. Constant movement, challenging drills, and positive feedback due to your fun style are the hallmarks of a well-structured practice.



Make sure you lay out your practice schedule well in advance, including which drills you want to run, the order in which you want to run them, and how much time you plan on devoting to each part of practice. If you throw a practice together while sitting in your car before the players arrive, your session probably won't be much fun for the players or very effective in developing their skills. Chapter 6 has the scoop on preparing and running great practice sessions.



When selecting drills for your practices, always go with exercises that keep the kids moving and pose enough of a challenge to hold their interest. Drills that force the players to stand in line awaiting turns are boring, and they slice into the amount of learning taking place. Kids learn and develop by playing and getting plenty of repetitions, not by listening to you talk or standing in line. You can find a wide range of drills for hitting, fielding, and base running in Chapters 12 and 13; these exercises should challenge and excite beginning and intermediate players.

You can squeeze the most fun and productivity out of every practice session by keeping these additional tips in mind:

- **Use your position to be a positive influence on your players' lives.** Yes, you volunteered to coach kids the game of baseball and all the skills that go along with playing it. What you may not have given much thought to is the tremendous impact you'll have on these young lives in areas outside the game. Your position gives you the opportunity to make a significant difference. For example, when your kids are warming up (see Chapter 16), you can take the time to talk to them about the importance of doing well

in school. You also can speak to them about the importance of staying away from tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. For more on dealing with all kinds of personalities on your team, check out Chapter 5.

- ✓ **Conduct stress-free practices.** Allow your youngsters to make mistakes without the fear of criticism or embarrassment. Before your first practice of the season, make it a point to let the kids (and their parents; see Chapter 4) know that mistakes are part of learning how to play the game. All you should ask of them is that they listen to your instructions and try their best every time.

Taking your coaching out to the old ballgame

Being a youth baseball coach requires you to adapt to ever-changing conditions — from game to game and from inning to inning. You'll be challenged to make all sorts of decisions, without the luxury of time to think about them, while dealing with multiple responsibilities and countless distractions. You have

- ✓ Playing time to monitor
- ✓ Defensive adjustments to make
- ✓ Plays to call
- ✓ Pep talks to give
- ✓ Energy levels and enthusiasm to keep high

Yes, a pretty hefty list of responsibilities accompanies game day, but don't just sit there and reach for the antacid tablets. In Chapter 7, you get the skinny on all you need to help game day go smoothly.



Besides giving kids the chance to wear colorful uniforms and put all their skills to use against opposing teams, game day gives you all sorts of teachable moments. Reinforce the important points you brought up during practice, such as the following:

- ✓ Working together as a team
- ✓ Displaying good sportsmanship
- ✓ Abiding by the rules
- ✓ Doing your best at all times
- ✓ Having fun, regardless of what the scoreboard reads

Succeeding in the Dual Role of Coach and Parent

We certainly don't have to tell you that being a parent is an enormously difficult job. But we should tell you that handling the dual role of parent and coach to your child can present its share of unique challenges — many of which you haven't even thought about. In Chapter 2, we prepare you to deal with the issues that may materialize after you step on the field and your child steps into the batter's box. Being prepared for the issues, and knowing what to do when they pop up, enables you to create memorable experiences for you and your youngster.



Don't allow yourself to view your position as coach as an opportunity to control your child's destiny. Your coaching title isn't a vehicle that can steer your child to a spot on an All-Star team or secure a college scholarship for him down the road. If you take this unhealthy approach, you'll compromise your youngster's experience, because you'll push him harder than the other kids, demand more from him, and criticize him when he doesn't fulfill your unfair expectations. All you may do is drain his interest in learning and playing the game in the coming years.

Conquering Coaching Challenges

Being a youth baseball coach requires more than the ability to teach batting grips and throwing fundamentals. You also need to handle all the unique challenges that appear throughout the season. Having the knowledge and the confidence to steer your team around these obstacles — so they don't sabotage the fun and cut into the learning — is vital.

Working with all the different types of kids you'll find on your roster — ranging from the super shy and the nonstop talker to the athletically gifted and clumsy — is one of the most exciting and challenging aspects of coaching any sport. Sure, the smorgasbord of personalities will test your patience, communication skills, and ability to connect with each individual to meet their constantly changing needs, but we're confident that you're up for the task. Chapter 17 provides plenty of advice for dealing with potential discipline issues you'll encounter (as well as a number of other common coaching challenges).

Regardless of the skill level of your players, and whether this is their first venture into organized baseball or they have been collecting grass stains diving for ground balls for several seasons, one of your top priorities is

keeping them as safe as possible during practices and games. Although making any season injury-free is nearly impossible, you can strive for safety by teaching only proper techniques, preparing for emergency situations and knowing how to handle them, and having a properly stocked first-aid kit on hand at all practices and games. You can find tips and advice for keeping kids safe in Chapter 16.