

Stepping Into Coaching



If you are like most youth league coaches, you have probably been recruited from the ranks of concerned parents, sport enthusiasts, or community volunteers. Like many rookie and veteran coaches, you probably have had little formal instruction on how to coach. But when the call went out for coaches to assist with the local youth baseball program, you answered because you like children and enjoy baseball, and perhaps you wanted to be involved in a worthwhile community activity.

Your initial coaching assignment may be difficult. Like many volunteers, you may not know everything there is to know about baseball or about how to work with children. Our program will help you learn the basics of coaching baseball effectively.

To start, let's take a look at what's involved in being a coach. We discuss your responsibilities as a coach. We also talk about how to handle the situation when your child is on the team you coach, and we examine five tools for being an effective coach.

Your Responsibilities As a Coach

As a baseball coach, you'll be called on to do the following:

1. *Provide a safe physical environment.*

Playing baseball holds an inherent risk, but as a coach you're responsible for regularly inspecting the practice and competition fields as well as for making sure that your team has and understands how and when to use the proper protective equipment (see the checklists for facilities and equipment in chapter 3).

2. *Be an effective and positive communicator.*

You'll communicate not only with your players but also with parents, umpires, and administrators. Communicate in a way that is positive and that demonstrates you have the best interests of the players at heart. Chapter 2 will help you communicate effectively and positively.

3. *Teach the skills, strategies, and rules of baseball.*

We introduce you to the Ripken method of teaching and practicing the strategies and skills young athletes need to know—an approach that kids thoroughly enjoy. We ask you to help all players become the best they can. In chapter 6 we show you how to teach baseball skills, and we provide practice plans for different age groups. In chapter 8 we provide descriptions of all the skills you'll need to teach and to help you detect and correct errors that players typically make. As a coach you also must teach your players the rules of baseball. You'll find the main rules in chapter 7.

4. *Direct players in competition.*

This includes determining starting lineups and a substitution plan, relating appropriately to umpires and to opposing coaches and players, and making tactical decisions during games (see chapter 10). Remember that the focus is not on winning at all costs but on teaching your kids to compete well, do their best, and strive to win within the rules.

5. *Be a role model.*

Just as kids imitate their parents and teachers, they take their cues from their coaches when it comes to how they act on the baseball diamond. A coach's attitude and behavior set the tone for the atmosphere surrounding a team. If a coach gets visibly frustrated with his or her players, the higher-skilled players on the team are more likely to get frustrated with the lower-skilled players. The lower-skilled players may get easily frustrated with themselves and not enjoy the sport. Similarly, a coach who yells at umpires will foster that type of behavior within his or her team as well as among the team's supporters.

These are your responsibilities as a coach. But coaching becomes even more complicated when your child is a player on the team you coach. If this is the case, you'll have to take into account your roles as both a coach and a parent, and you'll have to think about how those roles relate to each other.

Coaching Your Own Child

Many coaches—if not most coaches—get involved in youth baseball because they want to make sure that their child has a positive experience. The local league might be short on coaches and be looking for volunteers, or perhaps a dad or mom who has a busy work week sees coaching as a way to spend some time with his or her child.

Some of these parents have a lot of baseball experience while others have very little. Some have coached before while others have never set foot on a field. All of them want their children to have a great experience, and none of them want to show favoritism. This seeming contradiction can lead to some difficult situations for these coaches.

For parents coaching their own children, the golden rule is to treat your child just as you treat everyone else on the team. It doesn't matter if your kid is one of the best players or one of the lower-skilled players. On the one hand, don't give your child preferential treatment when it comes to playing time or a spot in the batting order. On the other hand, don't weigh your child down with unfair burdens that aren't placed on the other players. For example, don't ask your kid to always carry the team equipment or to make sure the other players do all the drills correctly. And finally, be very careful not to discipline

your child in a way that separates him or her from the others. You want your kid to look forward to being on the baseball field, not dread what punishment mom or dad might inflict if practice isn't going well.

Of course, balancing this dynamic can be difficult. The natural instinct is to protect your child, but the fear is that other parents will think that you are playing favorites. If your policy is to not argue with umpires—as it should be—make sure you don't question an umpire if your kid is on the short end of a close call. If you reverse the batting order each inning, make sure that your child has to adhere to that rule. If every player sits out two innings, your kid should, too. Make sure that any personal disagreements that arise are handled at home and not in front of the team, and do not discipline your child at practice for something he or she did wrong at home.

You always have time before and after practices and games to give your child extra attention and to help him or her improve. But when the team is together on the field, make sure that you do the best that you can to give everyone equal attention and treatment.

As players get older and things such as designating team captains and handing out team awards become more a part of coaching, continue to treat your child the same way you treat the other team members. If you think that your kid is captain material, instead of appointing captains, let the team vote and be willing to stick with those selections. You can do the same thing for team awards, or you can even let the parents vote on them. When you handle difficult situations in this manner, no one can question your motives. The parents and team members can't accuse you of favorable treatment if your child is selected, and your son or daughter can't accuse you of going out of your way to avoid acknowledging him or her. In the long run, the recognition will mean a lot more to your child if it comes from teammates than if it comes from you.

Another thing to be wary of is singling your child out for mistakes made by the team or for overall lackluster play. Everyone is responsible in these situations. If you think that you need to be a little more stern than usual to get through to your team, address the whole group. Don't let your need to have an outlet to release your pent-up frustration cause you to unfairly discipline your child.

Remember, when it comes to having your son or daughter on your team, no matter what level you are coaching, live by this golden rule: Treat your child the same way as you treat every other team member. If you can manage to do that, your lives will be much easier on and off the field.

Now let's look at some of the qualities that will help you become an effective coach.

Five Tools of an Effective Coach

Have you purchased the traditional coaching tools—things like whistles, coaching clothes, sport shoes, and a clipboard? They'll help you coach, but to

be a successful coach you'll need five other tools that money can't buy. These tools are available only through self-examination and hard work; they're easy to remember with the acronym COACH:

- C** Comprehension
- O** Outlook
- A** Affection
- C** Character
- H** Humor

Comprehension

Comprehension of the rules, strategies, and skills of baseball is required. You must understand the elements of the sport. To assist you in learning about the game, we describe rules, strategies, and skills in chapters 7, 8, and 9.

To improve your comprehension of baseball, do the following:

- Read the technical section of this book, chapters 8 and 9.
- Read or view other Ripken instructional products (books, CD-ROMs, DVDs, *Coach's Clipboard*).
- Contact youth baseball organizations.
- Attend Ripken Baseball or other coaching clinics.
- Talk with more experienced coaches.
- Observe local college, high school, and youth baseball games.
- Watch baseball games on television.

In addition to acquiring baseball knowledge, you must implement proper training and safety methods so that your players can participate with little risk of injury. Even then, injuries may occur. And more often than not, you'll be the first person responding to your players' injuries, so be sure you understand the basic emergency care procedures described in chapter 3. Also, read in that chapter how to handle more serious sports injuries.

Outlook

This coaching tool refers to your perspective and goals—what you are seeking as a coach. The most common coaching objectives are to provide an enjoyable experience, to develop the players' fundamental skills, and to get players to perform to the best of their abilities on a consistent basis. Thus, your outlook involves the priorities you set, your planning, and your vision for the future.

While all coaches focus on competition, we want you to focus on positive competition, keeping the pursuit of victory in perspective by making decisions

that first are in the best interest of the players' development and mental well-being. Winning games should not be the top priority when it comes to your decision making.

So, how do you know if your outlook and priorities are in order? Here's a little test for you:

Which situation would you be most proud of?

- a. knowing that each participant enjoyed playing baseball
- b. seeing that all players improved their baseball skills
- c. winning the league championship

Which statement best reflects your thoughts about sport?

- a. If it isn't fun, don't do it.
- b. Everyone should learn something every day.
- c. Sport isn't fun if you don't win.

How would you like your players to remember you?

- a. as a coach who was fun to play for
- b. as a coach who provided a good base of fundamental skills
- c. as a coach who had a winning record

Which statement would you most like to hear from a parent of a player on your team?

- a. Mike really had a good time playing baseball this year.
- b. Nicole learned some important lessons playing baseball this year.
- c. Willie played on the first-place baseball team this year.

Which of the following would be the most rewarding moment of your season?

- a. having your team not want to stop playing, even after practice is over
- b. seeing one of your players finally master the skill of fielding a ground ball and throwing accurately to the right base
- c. winning the league championship

Look over your answers. If you most often selected *a* responses, then having fun is most important to you. A majority of *b* answers suggests that skill development is what attracts you to coaching. And if *c* was your most frequent response, winning tops your list of coaching priorities. If your priorities are in order, your players' well-being will take precedence over your team's win-loss record every time.

ASEP, Babe Ruth League, Inc., and Ripken Baseball all agree with ASEP's motto, which will help you keep your outlook in line with the best interests of the kids on your team. It summarizes in four words all you need to remember when establishing your coaching priorities:

Athletes First, Winning Second

This motto recognizes that striving to win is an accepted component of organized sports. But it emphatically states that efforts in striving to win should never be made at the expense of the athletes' well-being, development, and enjoyment.

Take the following actions to better define your outlook:

1. Determine your priorities for the season.
2. Prepare for situations that challenge your priorities.
3. Set goals for yourself and your players that are consistent with those priorities and are appropriate for the age group you coach.
4. Plan how you and your players can best attain those goals.
5. Review your goals frequently to be sure that you are staying on track.

Affection

This is another vital tool you will want to have in your coaching kit: a genuine concern for the young people you coach. It involves having a love for working with kids, a desire to share with them your love and knowledge of baseball, and the patience and understanding that allow each player to grow through his or her involvement in sport.

You can demonstrate your affection and patience in many ways, including the following:

- Make an effort to get to know each player on your team.
- Treat each player as an individual.
- Empathize with players trying to learn new and difficult skills.
- Treat players as you would like to be treated under similar circumstances.
- Be in control of your emotions.
- Show your enthusiasm for being involved with your team.
- Keep an upbeat and positive tone in all of your communications.

Character

The fact that you have decided to coach young baseball players probably means that you think participation in organized athletics is important. But

whether or not that participation develops character in your players depends as much on you as it does on the sport itself. How can you build character in your players?

Having good character means modeling appropriate behaviors for sports and life. That means more than just saying the right things. What you say and what you do must match. There is no place in coaching for the “Do as I say, not as I do” philosophy. Challenge, support, encourage, and reward every youngster, and your players will be more likely to accept, even celebrate, their differences. Be in control before, during, and after all practices and contests. And don’t be afraid to admit that you were wrong. No one is perfect!

Consider the following steps to being a good role model:

1. Take stock of your strengths and weaknesses.
2. Build on your strengths.
3. Set goals for yourself to improve on those areas you would not like to see copied.
4. If you slip up, apologize to your team and to yourself. You’ll do better next time.

Humor

Humor is an often-overlooked coaching tool. For our use it means having the ability to laugh at yourself and with your players during practices and contests. Nothing helps balance the tone of a serious skill-development session like a chuckle or two. And a sense of humor puts in perspective the many mistakes your players will make. So don’t get upset over each miscue or respond negatively to erring players. Allow your players and yourself to enjoy the ups, and don’t dwell on the downs.

Here are some tips for injecting humor into your practices:

- Make practices fun by including a variety of activities.
- Keep all players involved in games and skill practices.
- Consider laughter by your players a sign of enjoyment, not of waning discipline.
- Smile!