

# Setting Reasonable Expectations



Youth baseball coaches often fall into the trap of trying to teach too much. Remember, we emphasize that baseball is a simple game. In general, the teams that throw, catch, and hit the best are the ones that are the most successful. What determines whether a game, practice, or season is successful? In youth baseball, it should never be the number of wins and losses. In fact, winning should be way down on the list of priorities. If the baseball experience is enjoyable for the kids and they learn something, as coaches we should feel very good about it.

Even as the players get older and the competition intensifies—right up through the high school level—it is important to understand that they are kids and that kids are fragile. One negative experience can tarnish a player’s view of the sport for life. Neither an error nor a single lost game is worth turning a player off to baseball. At the youngest levels, the majority of players we coach will not play for their high school teams. At the high school level, most of the players will not play in college. Even at the collegiate level, only a tiny fraction of the players will go on to play professionally.

Coaches have a responsibility to the game of baseball. That responsibility is to create a positive, organized, enjoyable environment that fosters a love of the game within the players. If one of our players has a bad experience and stops playing baseball, chances are that none of his or her children will play the game. Then, maybe none of his or her grandchildren will play. The effect of that one bad experience can multiply, especially with so many recreational activities vying for our young people’s attention. And you can bet that if one player is turned off to the game, others will follow. Most kids are followers, not leaders. The effect of that single negative situation can become devastating to the game’s health when repeated consistently around the country.

It is imperative that you set goals for your teams and that you celebrate all of the successes—small or large. You can set general goals that cut across all age levels, and you can set age-specific goals. If these goals are accomplished, regardless of the team’s final win-loss record, consider the season a success. Sometimes not all of the goals are attained. Circumstances beyond our control can intervene to prevent us from accomplishing some things we set out to accomplish. In these instances it is human nature for a coach to be hard on him- or herself. It is important to look back at what you as a coach might have been able to do to accomplish more, but don’t beat yourself up too much about it. If the kids had fun and learned something, the experience was more than worthwhile. At Ripken Baseball, one of our core philosophies is *Look to the future, and learn from the past*. There always is room for improvement. Even teams that win the World Series can improve. Just look at all of the off-season roster moves that championship clubs make every year. If you use the general and age-specific goals we present in this book as guidelines, and you do everything in your power to help your team accomplish those goals within the context of an environment that stresses fun and learning, everything will turn out fine.

## Goals for All Ages

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All coaches—even at the highest levels—should strive to accomplish some fundamental goals. In the broadest sense these goals are a good barometer of how successful the season was from a coaching perspective. As a coach, continually ask yourself these questions to help determine whether you are on the right track:

- Are the kids having fun?
- Are the kids improving?
- Are the kids learning?

### Are the Kids Having Fun?

Baseball is a game. We stress that fact over and over in this course. It should be fun. You can tell very easily whether a group of kids is having fun. Do they move quickly to the field when they arrive, or do they have to be forced to play? Do they smile when they are on the field, or do they appear to be sad or bored? Do the kids laugh and exude energy, or are they lethargic? Do they ask to stay and practice or play longer, or do they want to leave early?

Kids are not hard to read. If they are having fun, keep doing what you are doing. If they appear lethargic, sluggish, bored, or unhappy, take a look at what you are doing and make some adjustments. Remember that kids of all ages have limited attention spans. Keep them in small groups. Keep them active. Provide them with a variety of activities. Turn drills into contests. Give out prizes. Give your players nicknames. Create a rotation in which every player gets to play every position. (At the youngest levels this is important so that players can develop all of the fundamental skills they need to play baseball. As kids get older it is to their benefit to be able to play several positions if they hope to continue playing at higher levels). Yell and scream in a positive manner. Enjoy yourself. If the coach has fun, chances are the team will have fun; and if the team has fun, chances are that the players will come back for more next year. That's the ultimate goal.

### Are the Kids Improving?

One of the most rewarding things about coaching youth baseball is getting to see the players improve. It's not a stretch to say that kids can improve each and every time they practice. At our camps we often come in contact with groups of kids who have trouble playing catch at the beginning of the week. By the end of the week we actually see some of these same kids turning double plays in our afternoon games.

The next section of this guide deals with age-appropriate goals. In that section we get into a deeper discussion of motor skill development and what types of skills can be taught successfully at different ages. The skills that you

emphasize should not be too difficult for the kids to master. Kids have an innate desire to learn and improve. When they are successful and their successes are celebrated, the thirst to learn more increases. As coaches we have to put the players in positions to experience success and then go out of our way to point out the improvement. This sounds like an oversimplification, but just like throwing and catching, success and positive reinforcement are as important for the 8-year-old as they are for the 22-year-old.

## Are the Kids Learning?

Every day at our camps we make a point to review what we did the day before. At the beginning of each session we ask questions about what was covered the previous day to reinforce the lessons and make sure the concepts were understood and absorbed. If we find that the kids are struggling with a lesson or concept, we need to spend more time on the review to make sure that they have grasped the lesson completely. If the kids understand everything, we move on to a new lesson. The following day we repeat the same process, reviewing everything that has been taught to that point.

It is important to make sure that your players are learning something in addition to having fun. Learning and fun go hand in hand. As kids learn and understand they get better and want to learn more. When they improve they have more fun. By keeping the kids active and being creative we can make sure that they learn while having fun. If kids are having fun they often don't realize that they are learning or practicing, which means you can hold their attention longer. This leads to more efficient and effective practices.

When coaching, especially when dealing with skills that build upon one another, it is important to review and make sure that the players have grasped the initial lesson before you introduce something more complex. Introducing new concepts that the players are not prepared for can lead to failure. Repeated failure often leads to frustration. Frustration can cause kids to quit playing baseball.

At our camps we like to use different buzzwords to emphasize our teaching points. For example, for the Soft Toss Drill, all we want the kids to concentrate on is *loose hands, quick bat*. For weight shift and hitting off of a tee we say that you have to *go back to go forward*. In the infield we catch a ground ball with a *wide base, butt down, hands out in front*. You will find these buzzwords throughout this course. Use them to help your players absorb the lessons you teach them. Try to come up with some terms of your own, too. Do whatever it takes to help the players learn what you are attempting to teach them.

## Age-Specific Goals

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For the purposes of teaching baseball effectively, we have broken all players down into the following age groups: 4 to 6, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, 13 to 14, and 15 and up. Some kids mature physically much faster than others. Motor skill

development varies as well, but for the most part you can teach similar skills to the kids within these separate age breakdowns and have them experience success. If you look at the breakdowns, the 4-to-6 age group represents the beginners. At ages 7 to 9 fine motor skill development has progressed to the point that most kids possess the ability to learn to catch and hit a pitched ball. At ages 10 to 12 players begin to decide for themselves that they like baseball and might want to pursue it a little more seriously. We separated the 13-to-14 group because these players are trying to make the adjustment to the 80- or 90-foot diamond while waiting for their bodies to fill out. Once players turn 15 they generally are fairly serious and capable of executing most, if not all, of the skills and strategies necessary to play baseball at a high level.

We believe strongly in keeping things simple when teaching the game of baseball. With that in mind we have developed five goal areas for each of these age groups. As coaches we want to keep these five goal areas in mind every time we plan a practice. They represent the fundamental building blocks for success. The goals at one level need to be accomplished before the goals at the next level can be pursued. If this happens, great! Consider yourself an expert coach. But, don't feel as though you have failed if you don't get beyond the goals for a particular age group. If your team achieves these basic goals, your season should be considered a success. If you don't reach the goals, that is okay, too. Stress all of the positive things that were accomplished, and try to figure out how to accomplish all of the goals the next time. Remember: *Look toward the future, and learn from the past.*

Similarly, if you are coaching a team of 7-year-olds and it is obvious that they have not mastered the concepts and skills set forth in the age-appropriate goals for the 4-to-6 age group, it is imperative that you go back and work with the players until they have achieved those goals before moving on to more advanced teachings. Likewise, if the team you coach achieves the age-specific goals quickly, it might be worthwhile for you to attempt to accomplish some of the goals outlined for the next age group.

Always keep in mind that just as some kids mature faster than others, some kids will master fundamental skills more rapidly than others. Stay in tune with each individual child's needs and abilities so that you can tailor your work with each player during a particular drill to his or her situation. For example, if you are working on catching ground balls properly, some kids will be ready to field balls that are rolled or hit harder or to one side or the other before others. You can either group kids according to skill level, or if that is impossible, make sure that you adapt the drill to meet everyone's individual needs and abilities on a player-by-player basis.

### *Five Goals for the 4-to-6 Age Group*

1. **Learning the basic rules**—the right direction to run when the ball is hit; runners must touch the bases; how to record outs (catch the ball in the air, throw to first, or tag the runners); running past first base; scoring a run; three outs constitute an inning.

2. **Throwing mechanics**—turn the body so that the front shoulder points toward the target; keep the elbow above the shoulder; step toward the target with the nonthrowing foot and release the ball.
3. **Tracking**—follow the ball with the eyes to the glove, whether on the ground or in the air (use softer balls); use two hands to catch and field; try to catch the ball out in front of the body.
4. **Hitting**—how to hold and swing the bat; batting safety (when not to swing bats, wearing batting helmets); hitting off a tee; hitting softly tossed pitches.
5. **Learning positional play**—if the ball is hit to your buddy, let him or her field it (note to coach: try not to put more than 10 players on a field at a time).

#### *Five Goals for the 7-to-9 Age Group*

1. **Learning the basic rules**—force outs; tagging up; baserunning (when you don't have to run; not running into or past teammates on the base paths); balls and strikes.
2. **Throwing mechanics**—introduce the four-seam grip; point the front shoulder, step, and throw; introduce the concept of generating momentum toward the target and following the throw.
3. **Catching and fielding**—thrown and hit balls; fingers up versus fingers down; see the glove and the ball; use two hands; forehands and backhands; introduce the underhand flip; first-base fundamentals; crossover and drop steps.
4. **Hitting**—choosing the right bat; proper grip; hitting pitched balls; introduce drill work (Tee Work, Soft Toss, Short Toss).
5. **Learning positional play**—learn the positions and the areas each player should cover; cover the base when the ball is not hit to you; basics of cutoffs and relays.

#### *Five Goals for the 10-to-12 Age Group*

1. **Learning the basic rules**—infield fly rule; balks.
2. **Baserunning**—leads; steals; extra-base hits.
3. **Pitching and throwing mechanics**—wind-up versus stretch; four-seam grip; shuffle, throw, follow; pitcher covering first.
4. **Hitting**—repetitions; drill work (Tee Work, Soft Toss, Short Toss, Stick-ball, Lob Toss, One-Arm Drill); bunting.
5. **Learning team fundamentals**—cutoffs and relays; basic bunt defenses; basic first-and-third situations; underhand flip (Box Drill) and double plays; defending the steal; infield and outfield communication and priorities.

*Five goals for the 13-to-14 age group*

1. **Throwing mechanics and pitching**—emphasis on generating momentum toward the target and following the throw (larger field); breaking balls; change-ups; pitching mechanics and using the body effectively (longer distance); pickoff mechanics; flatwork (drills); introduction to long toss.
2. **Hitting**—introduce situational hitting (inside-out swing, hitting behind runners, hit and run, productive outs); sacrifice bunting versus bunting for a hit; understanding the count.
3. **Baserunning**—first-and-third situations; steal breaks; delayed steals; reading situations and reacting to them.
4. **Fielding**—generating momentum back toward the target on throws when necessary; crossover and drop steps; backhands and when to use them; double-play depth; pitcher covering first; infield communication.
5. **Team fundamentals**—pickoff plays; full bunt defenses; full first-and-third defenses; pop-up and fly ball priorities; double plays and underhand flips.

*Five goals for the 15+ age group*

1. **Throwing mechanics and pitching**—long toss; flatwork (drills); continue mastering breaking and off-speed pitches; throwing for accuracy; generating momentum toward the target and following the throw; pickoff mechanics.
2. **Hitting**—mental aspects (hitter's count versus pitcher's count); two-strike hitting; aggressive versus defensive swings; situational hitting; productive outs; advanced game situations and defenses.
3. **Baserunning**—one-way leads; going on the first move; reacting to batted balls; tag-up situations; third-base rules; no-out, one-out, and two-out rules.
4. **Fielding**—understanding and adapting to playing conditions (grass versus dirt, sun, bad fields); Fence Drill (outfield); crossover and drop steps; do-or-die plays at the plate; preventing runners from taking extra bases; communicating between pitches.
5. **Learning team fundamentals**—cutoffs and relays (introduce the trailer concept); advanced pickoff plays (daylight play; plays put on by fielders) and when to use them; double plays; advanced game situations and defenses.