

Beginner Tips For Coaching Softball

This article is strictly for beginners. It makes no attempt to teach experienced coaches something they don't know. If you have any experience coaching, you are certainly welcome to read it but please don't expect to get much out of it.

Deciding To Coach

If you are a parent of a young girl and are wondering if you should try coaching, I highly recommend it. You will probably learn more about yourself than you care to. I can assure you that if you take the right approach and expect little in return for your considerable efforts, you won't be disappointed! However, if your aim in volunteering is to enhance your child's experience with softball, forget about it. There are just too many distinct pressures on a coach to concentrate much on your own child. In fact, you will most likely give your kid an inferiority complex by the end of the season as you ignore her to teach other children. If you want to enhance your child's experience, play catch with her, pitch to her, go to a game with the entire family, enjoy the sport together. Softball like most sports relies on parental volunteers. Without these individuals who give up their precious free time for your children, there would be no recreational leagues. The experienced coaches know they will give a lot and receive only grief in return. They do it for love of the sport and love of children in general. They are mostly trying to give back what they received as children. There are not enough of them. In short, if you are like-minded, softball needs you.

Safety Certification

The first step of becoming a coach is to obtain "safety certification." This is a four hour course which teaches you some extremely fundamental aspects of coaching kids sports. It does not really teach you much about safety but is more of an informational and philosophical discussion. It lasts about 4 hours and is frequently referred to as "Rutgers certification" because it is named after Rutgers University in New Jersey who pioneered the course for parental volunteer coaches in order to mitigate legal liabilities for volunteer coaches. You must take this before you go out on the field in most states. You must also make sure all your coaches have obtained it. Do not, under any circumstances, allow anyone who is not safety certified to assist you on the field. You do yourself, the kids, and the volunteer a disservice if you do.

Having Fun

Before we talk about specifics of coaching, let me offer up one pearl of wisdom. Softball, like all athletic endeavors, is a structured, goal-oriented activity. If you "just want the kids to have fun," you are taking the wrong approach before you get out of the box. There are myriad other activities which afford your child and the children of others the opportunity to "just have fun." Sure you want the kids to have fun but this is accomplished by teaching them the game and the skills needed to succeed at it. Your goal in coaching must be to teach.

Draft Day

Your first season as coach most likely begins with a draft. Presumably you've met with your assistant coaches all of whom will likely have kids on the team who you are required to draft. Now you must piece together a team that is competitive with the other teams in your league. If you do not, your kids will know that their team is not good and will begin to take you less seriously as a coach. Also if you draft an inferior team, the parents of your kids will not reason that you put together a team where the girls all "like each other." They'll assume you are a bad coach. So, please do not attend the draft meeting with a list of your kid's or other coaches' kids' best friends. You can certainly pick some of friends but you need to build a team that contains kids of the appropriate skill levels. And your daughter's experience will be greatly enhanced by meeting new kids.

Get And Stay Organized

In order to be a good coach, one of the first items on the agenda is organization. You simply must be organized in order to succeed. You need a complete list of team members, contact numbers, etc. Every time you and your coaches sit down to contact parents, you must make every effort to contact them all and communicate the desired message. Not to do so will cause you much grief. And it isn't fair to the kids. Get organized and stay organized. The kids deserve this much from you. On the first contact of the kids you have drafted, you should make the call. Your coaches can make future calls but the first contact should be made by you to establish who you (the primary contact) are, to plan the first practice, and to obtain information. You don't need to have long conversations with each parent giving them your resume or explaining your philosophy about coaching. Give them the basics and get as much information as possible on each player including cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. You'll be glad you did. One thing you may wish to formulate on the first call is an

idea of the best days of the week to practice. You likely will not be able to find a day on which every kid is currently available but you do not want to make your weekly practice on the day of the week nobody can make it. Once you decide which day to practice, let the parents know. If parents express anger because their kid cannot make that day, explain to them that you have polled the entire team and this is the best day for you and the rest of the team. Tell them you understand that their kid cannot make it but if you change to this day or that, this kid or that cannot make it. Also explain why this day is the best for you. Explain that you are sorry but you don't have a lot of choices because you, like they, have a very busy schedule. If you run into serious problems with this first step of actually coaching, call together a meeting of the parents. Parents often behave more reasonably when they are in a group of similarly situated people. So now you have contacted each and every team member, told them when your first practice is, and established a day or days for weekly practices. Your next step is to design a practice. Practices should be one and one half hour long. One hour is simply not long enough and two is probably too long to keep your kids' attention. If you have older girls or are in a very competitive league, it is OK to extend beyond an hour and a half but that is because the girls are more serious.

Your First Practice

Plan to arrive at your first practice, and every one thereafter, 10-15 minutes before the established start time. Many parents will arrive a little early, some late, but arriving just at the start time means you are not ready on time. This will cost you as you take 5 minutes to move the equipment to the field, another 5 to get everyone in for a discussion, and you will be off balance for the first half hour. The famous NFL coach Vince Lombardi said that you are not really on time unless you are on the field, ready to go at least fifteen minutes before practice begins. This applies to coaches themselves more than it does to players. At your first practice, or earlier if you have the opportunity, distribute a packet of information for parents and players. You probably have to distribute and then collect medical release information along with other information but also include some creations of your own which include a list of players on the team, their contact numbers, the rainout number and policy for your league, the game and practice schedules, and any other routine information which parents are likely to call you about. If you do not distribute this sort of ordinary information, you can expect to get weekly calls from many of your team parents because common sense is just not that common and even though the league probably posts rainout information on their web site, most of your parents will be totally ignorant of this!

Bring Ice

Another important item which is simple but should not escape your attention is always bring ice and some plastic sandwich bags to practices and games. It hurts to get hit by a softball. Having ice you can quickly put into a baggy is the most useful way to deal with injuries such as this. I recently attended a little league tournament game in which the pitcher took a hard line drive to the shoulder. We were standing around waiting for play to resume when I asked the other team's coaches if they had ice to put on the injury. They didn't! This is lazy and inexcusable. This sort of ordinary sense is the bare minimum for having supervisory authority over my and other folks' kids. Always have ice and something to put it into.

Always Two Adults

Speaking of injuries, it is entirely possible that kids will get injured in practice or games. You must have another adult present at all practices. They don't necessarily need to be safety certified (in which case they must not be on the field) but they must be there in the unlikely event that you must leave to seek medical attention. The other adult should not continue practice in your absence but he or she will be there to supervise the kids until their parents arrive to pick them up. Two adults to a practice period. If you are alone, don't practice.

Structure Practices Practices need to be broken down into segments. Each segment does not have to be a specific length but thinking of a 1 1/2 hour practice as consisting of three half hour pieces is probably a good idea. You must begin each practice with a warm-up and stretching. Stretching is best accomplished after the body has warmed so I suggest you begin with a brief, easy run such as twice around the bases or using some landmark near the field like out to the outfield fence and back. Then after the girls have warmed a bit, begin stretching. Girls can begin warming, then stretching right after they arrive - you don't need the whole team to do this. And starting before some kids arrive makes the late parents feel guilty about being late. Never blame a kid for being late or missing practice. Your kids do not choose when or where their parents will drive them. It is not their fault so do not even speak to them about lateness.

Play Catch

A complete discussion of stretching is beyond the scope of this article but suffice it to say the kids must stretch their leg and arm muscles, and their back and torso muscles. Once this is accomplished, it is time for some catching and throwing. If it is your first practice, you may want to do some very basic things like having the kids roll the ball back and forth while you and your coaches teach them how to field a ground ball. I suggest beginning this without a glove. If you can get a

ground ball without a glove, you can do it with one. Emphasize proper body position and supervise the girls to ensure they are doing this properly. After some bare-handed rolling, have the girls put on their mitts to field the rolled balls. Now have one girl roll it and one throw the it back to the other while you and your coaches emphasize proper throwing technique. When I was a kid, we often spoke of "throwing like a girl." Guess what, girls don't throw that way anymore! But if you teach nothing else during this first year of coaching, you want to teach throwing and catching because after these two, everything else will eventually fall into place. Do not fret about spending too much time on throwing and catching, you can't.

Infield Practice

After a good session of catch, you should be into your second half-hour segment. This is a good time to do infield practice. If you have two adults, you can split into two groups. Both groups do not have to do the same thing. One group, perhaps the more needy one, could continue working on catching and throwing which we'll get to in a minute. The infield practice should provide the opportunity for each kid to play each position. You don't need to have a bat in your hand with girls at 10 or younger. You simply roll the ball to each kid playing in the proper position and have her throw to first. If this seems too easy, roll the ball harder and mix in some popups. The important thing is to emphasize good body position on fielding and good throwing mechanics on throws to first. As an aside, this first fielding practice is your first opportunity to see where the girls may play in an actual game. I'm all for allowing the girls to play every position on the field (excluding pitcher and catcher) but if a girl is unable to throw the ball past the pitcher from third base, you are probably going to want to play her at second base during a game. Unfortunately, possibly as many as half your girls may not be able to make a throw from short or third and you'll have too many second basemen but you are going to work on throwing all season long and their opportunity to play other positions will come. What you don't want to do is set a kid up for abject failure by making them unable to accomplish the task at hand in a game. So make note of who you need to work on throwing skills with and during practice allow them to play all positions but don't have weak throwers play third and short during your first couple of games.

Perhaps you have some girls who need further throwing and catching practice early on. As I said, if you have two coaches and you are breaking up for infield practice, have one group of girls work with the other coach on throwing and catching. If the girls are really needy, have that coach catch with these girls in the outfield - don't have a group of girls who can neither throw or catch playing catch with each other. Start out with easy, close throws. Then move them back gradually. If the girls are really bad at catching, have them drop their mitts and catch with them bare handed while emphasizing two-handed catches from about ten feet. Again, if you learn to catch without a mitt, you will be able to do it with one. These girls need to play catch often but you cannot hold a gun to their parents' heads and force them to do this. Just do the best you can with the time allotted. If you've broken into two groups, one thing you don't want to do is stigmatize the girls with lesser abilities. After fifteen minutes or so, switch the two sets of girls. The good girls will go into the outfield for more throwing practice but this will be at a much higher level than the other group's catch was. Encourage them to catch with each other at greater and greater distances. Have them throw hard ground balls at each other. Your group of lesser skilled girls who are now doing infield practice will do just what the other girls did but move them in closer to ensure some success. Nothing breeds success like success. I don't want you to always make things too easy for the lesser skilled girls but I don't want you to make it too hard either. You will get them to where they need to be in a few weeks. They need to be able to field a groundball and make a throw. So work on it but make sure they feel some success. While you are running your infield drill, take a moment to praise girls who seem to have done something better than they usually do. False praise is counter-productive but if a weak thrower makes the play and throws a little stronger than usual, say something like "nice throw" so they know when you see they have done something good. Every kid knows when they do something wrong on the field of play. But when they have done something right, they aren't always so sure. If you reinforce a strong throw, then they are sure that what they did was significant and right. I'm not from the school of thought which says you need to praise everything every kid does but I do think that positive reinforcement will make your kids better. Softball and its brother baseball are full of opportunities for failure. Offering praise for good plays stands out and makes kids work even harder to gain more praise. Now you are an hour into your first practice. Things aren't quite as good as you had hoped but they aren't as bad as you feared. You've worked fielding and throwing, and the girls are coming along. They won't improve all that much in a first practice but they may go home and work some of these techniques. You should begin to expect perceivable improvement by the middle of the third practice. You just cannot rush these things. But you can encourage the girls to bug their fathers and mothers into playing catch once a week between practices. This will help you immensely so don't be afraid to broach the subject both with your kids and their parents. You can't force them but you can suggest. Try telling a parent that so and so has improved quite a bit. If you can catch with her once a week for fifteen minutes, she will improve even more.

Batting Practice

To me there is nothing as fun in diamond sports as hitting the ball. That is why I have saved this for the last segment of coaching a practice. You want your kids to leave the field wishing they could practice for another hour and a half. The best way to do this is to save hitting for last. At your early practices I strongly recommend using whiffle balls and a batting tee. If you have more than one tee, so much the better. You want to emphasize [good hitting fundamentals](#) and then let them hack away. Take a read through the hitting fundamentals section at your leisure. Emphasis at your first practice should be on proper stance. Then you can move into some more advanced points but always, always emphasize keeping the head still. If some of your girls are beyond the fundamentals and some are not, assuming you have two coaches, break into two groups again. Have the more advanced girls hit soft-tossed whiffle balls (if you don't have two tees) while the other girls are hitting off the tee. Splitting into two groups allows each kid to get twice the repetitions she would otherwise have gotten. Stay with a strict count like ten swings. This way each kid gets her fair share and things keep moving along. Again in order to avoid stigmatizing the lesser skilled group, switch half way through this final half hour. Each kid should hit off the tee as this is the best way to teach hitting. But if you don't have two tees and you do have two groups, you can pitch to one group. Oh, and lest I forget even though you are using whiffle balls, have the girls wear batting helmets. This is less for safety and more to get them acclimated to hitting while wearing a helmet. Nobody should ever hit without a helmet. In later practices, before the season begins, you will want to have batting practice with game styled balls and fielders in place. Early on, when you are emphasizing fundamentals, this is not necessary. But before you stick the kids out on the field in a real game, you want them to know what it feels like to hit real balls and field balls hit by their peers. If you have reached the end of practice and a few, but not all, parents have already shown up, you may waffle back and forth between continuing the practice for the girls whose parents have not yet arrived. I feel the same way. But consider what things are going to be like on days when you have somewhere to go after practice. Continuing practice a little late rewards the parents who haven't shown up by giving their kids more practice. Instead wrap up everything and be standing, waiting by the field when the late parents arrive. This may shame them enough to arrive on time the next time.

Remember To Keep It Simple

As you move on to more and more practices, you are going to feel pressure from yourself to teach more and more complex skills. Fight this pressure. Unless your kids are truly advanced, they really need the fundamental skills you taught at the first practice. Maybe you can modify the drills to make them more challenging or interesting but you must warm-up, stretch, throw, field ground balls and hit at every practice. Feel free to vary the mix but emphasize fundamentals.

Avoid dedicating a practice to hitting or to just fielding. This will bore the kids and the results may surprise you. I have done this a few times and each time I have done a hitting only practice, in the next game the kids' hitting was so bad that it was only surpassed by their fielding which was atrocious. Do all aspects of the game in practice with perhaps one drill emphasizing the team's weakest points. But don't work on these skills to the exclusion of all others.

Base Running

I have deliberately left out running the bases in my practice. This is an important skill but not one which you need to emphasize early on. You can introduce this at the second or third practice and once you do, you should continue to do some at each practice. A good time to place this is after the warm-up and stretching, before throwing and fielding. This will further warm them up. The first thing you want your kids to do is know how to run to first. They should swing the bat and then run to first, running through the base and turning towards the fence along the baseline. Place a coach just beyond the base whose hand they will slap after running through the base. If a kid slows along the way, the coach should yell encouragement to keep up the speed. Each kid ought to run at least twice and perhaps three times so you can correct any slow downs or not running through the bag.

After some sprints to first, you can teach them to run to each base, one at a time. And at your next practice you can have them go from home to second and second to home. Teach how to round the bases if you have them running multiple bases at one time. They won't do it right in the games but they need to have this concept introduced. Each practice you can do something a little different with base running. If there is stealing in your league, you will want to teach this. But whatever you work on, you should always do the run to first to begin with and you should always emphasize the importance of the base coach. The list of possible baserunning drills you can do is virtually limitless. Use your head and focus on the ones they seem to have trouble with in practice and games. Baserunning drills are usually pretty short as you can move through the entire team in a few minutes after which you can begin throwing followed by fielding. Do not try to accomplish more than one goal with each base-running drill. This will only confuse the kids. I recall the first practice I participated in as an assistant coach. The manager was flying by the seat of her pants and had no practice plan. When she decided to do base-running drills, she started with the run to first and then each kid was supposed to then run to second at the next "go." The kids on second were supposed to steal third (which is all our league allowed) before the runners began to go from home to first and then first to second. Are you confused yet? I was. Undoubtedly so were the kids. And after the practice the manager actually was angered when I pointed out that this drill was confusing! Stick to one goal when doing running drills. You really do have that much time. Much later on, perhaps at the mid-season point, perhaps after a game or two, you may wish to do "live batting" drills where the hitter runs out each hit and the fielders play the ball as they would in a game. This is fine but don't let practice become only this so the girls will "have fun" at your practices. Again, you need to work on the other fundamentals. Live batting practice or scrimmages are fun and your kids will improve but your practices should be organized and structured. That is the only way your team will improve. Improvement will convert to more fun than if you set out to "just have fun." Well that's it for now. We'll cover more advanced coaching aspects later but for now I wanted to make sure I covered the fundamentals!