

Par-Troy West Little League- Guide for T-ball and Farm Coaches

The mission of the Par-Troy West Little League T-ball and Farm programs is to introduce our children to the great game of baseball and to help them develop the skills necessary to enjoy our national pastime for not just their playing years but for a lifetime.

There is no more difficult a task than teaching 5 through 8 year olds how to play the game of baseball. However, as difficult as it is, there is nothing more gratifying than watching kids develop right before your eyes. To help you succeed in your goal of teaching your kids how to play this great game, we have put together this resource for you to refer to whenever you wish. Please note, this guide is offered solely to provide a framework and not as a directive.

To that end, here are a few suggestions that you as coaches might find helpful during your T-ball and Farm seasons.

General goals of the T-ball and Farm Programs

We as a board are acutely aware of the fact that T-ball coaches and Farm coaches are dealing with 5 through 8 year-old children with very limited attention spans. Thus, at these levels, we do not expect the coaches to focus on the nuances of the game of baseball. Rather, our desire is that all of the coaches focus on stressing the fundamentals of the game such as throwing, catching, fielding, hitting, and base running. (Focusing most on proper throwing, catching, and swing mechanics at these ages.)

Below you will find some suggested methods and drills to help you accomplish your goal of teaching your players the fundamentals of the game of baseball. Please remember that you are dealing with very young kids and that it should not be assumed that any of the players know the proper way to do things on a baseball field. To the contrary, you should take the approach that your players have never picked up a ball, glove, or bat before meeting you. That will ensure that no one is left behind.

Here are those tips:

1. Throwing

First things first, the coaches need to ascertain whether a child is lefty or righty. This can usually be accomplished by asking. However, if necessary, have a child who doesn't know throw a ball to you and he or she will most likely do so with their dominant hand.

After you have determined the hand with which each child throws, it is time to teach them how to properly hold a baseball. (This is probably the most overlooked fundamental.) The coach(es) should demonstrate how to hold the ball with his or her finger tips on the laces (4 seam grip to start). After the demonstration, have each child show you their grip. Understanding that the kids' hands are smaller and that they will most likely be unable to grip the ball with just two fingers, allow them to use three. Try to strongly discourage the children from holding the ball with all of his or her fingers. It is far too difficult to break them of that habit when they reach the age where they can hold the ball correctly.

Once they have learned how to hold the baseball, place the kids on the right field foul line, or in that vicinity. Have the kids turn their body slightly with their throwing shoulder and arm furthest away from the target, feet no more than shoulder width apart, and their front hip pointed where they want to throw the ball.

Then, adjust each player's body positioning and arms so that they are ready. Place each player's throwing arm in an L position with the ball facing away from the target and his or her elbow even or slightly above the shoulder. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT AS YOU WILL FIND THAT MANY CHILDREN DROP THEIR ELBOW AND SHORT-ARM THE BALL.**

Have the players hold the position for 10 seconds. Allow them to rest and then ask them to get into proper position again. (We understand that the kids will need to learn the proper way to get their arms into throwing position after fielding a ball or when pitching, however, it has been our experience that teaching the proper arm action first is the most effective way to ward off improper throwing of the baseball. Also, that seems to come about naturally after they are taught the proper arm angle.) Rest and repeat for a few minutes, focusing on those who are not grasping the concepts as readily as the others.

Once the kids are familiar with the positioning of their body and arm, it is time to incorporate the stride. Again, have coaches demonstrate how to commence a throw by positioning their body and arm, and then proceeding with the stride toward the intended target that initiates the throw. Stress that the stride (in general) serves to generate the power necessary to propel the ball by allowing the player to shift his weight from the back leg to the front leg.

Finally, teach the kids to follow through with the throwing arm after release across the front knee. Watch out for kids leaning back when throwing. That

habit not only effects the velocity and accuracy of a child's throw, it also puts them at risk of injury to their throwing arm and shoulder.

Once you have shown the kids the proper mechanics, have the kids do dry runs without a ball with the coaches focusing on correcting problem areas.

Before they attempt to throw the ball, the coach and an assistant should demonstrate the proper way to throw by incorporating all of the mechanics previously addressed. Focus on body position, arm position/angle, stride, arm action, and follow through. Repeat a couple of times so that the kids have a mental picture of what they are going to be asked to do.

After the dry runs, have each coach proceed down the line having kids throw to them. (The more coaches the better so that the kids don't get bored.) Give each child 5 throws and then move on to the next player. Focus on body position, and arm positioning/angle. It is important to stress that their elbow does not sink during the throwing motion.

**At this point, be on the lookout for the most common errors which are improper grip, dropping the elbow prior to throwing, striding with the wrong foot, striding to a soft front leg, stepping to the side, flying open rather than stepping toward the target and shifting their hips, and, lastly, improper follow through.

THIS APPROACH TO TEACHING THE MECHANICS OF THROWING IS MOST BENEFICIAL IF IT IS REPEATED EVERY PRACTICE FOR THE FIRST COUPLE OF WEEKS AS THE TIME BETWEEN PRACTICES WILL AFFECT THEIR ABILITY TO MASTER THE TECHNIQUES.

Throwing Drills

1. Start with kids kneeling on one knee (kneel on knee on your throwing side) – work on hip rotation (first backwards to coil, then uncoil and open hips ending up with throwing hip pointing at target as you release) –goal here is to add power and accuracy through hip rotation.
2. A. Start facing sideways with throwing hand away from target, and with hands in ready position, feet shoulder width apart, front hip pointing at target (ball in throwing hand with proper grip ready to throw, throwing hand in glove).

B. Break hands from ready position - throwing hand comes up and back with ball facing away from target, and extend glove hand simultaneously toward target)

C. Step toward target and throw ball, extending throwing arm out and down in front of thrower to extend and follow through

****Emphasize throwing only when the receiver is giving a proper “target” and their eyes meet – i.e. looking at the thrower with both hands up, and ready to catch the throw - “don’t throw to people who aren’t looking.”

THROWING MECHANICS SHOULD BE WORKED ON EVERY PRACTICE. IF YOUR KIDS FINISH THE SEASON HAVING MASTERED THE ART OF THROWING, YOUR SEASON WAS A SUCCESS.

2. Catching/Fielding the baseball

This is probably the second most difficult aspect of baseball to teach your kids (HITTING IS A CLOSE 3RD) because of the fear factor and the fact that they have to catch with their non-dominant hand. To teach catching properly and to remove the fear factor, begin by having the kids put their gloves down and start with teaching good fielding position.

Good fielding position involves have the kids square their bodies up to the ball, knees bent, and their feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart.

Once the kids are shown the proper fielding position have them place their non-dominant hand up in the air with their elbow bent and their fingers pointed up.

Using tennis balls or soft balls, have the kids focus on catching the balls keeping their fingers up and their eyes on the ball. (Most kids will try to catch the ball underhanded.)

** With respect to this drill, make certain that they are catching the ball with one hand as using two to actually catch the ball can be harmful in the future. Later they will be taught how to use their throwing hand to protect the catch and start the transition to throwing the ball (transfer).

During this drill, it is imperative that the ball be thrown chest high and slightly above.

This drill should be repeated with throws below the waist, having the kids catch the ball with their fingers pointed down. (This will be easier for them as it is a more natural action.)

Once the kids master these techniques bare-handed, it is time to put the gloves on and reinforce the techniques learned.

At this point, you will need to spend some time teaching the kids how to catch a baseball that is thrown or hit toward their mid-section. We recommend doing this with a glove because given the size of their hands, it will be impossible for the kids to turn their bare hands to the side and catch a waist high throw.

Once the primary fundamentals of catching are addressed, coaches should begin to incorporate the throwing hand. Protecting the catch (commonly known as using two hands) and transferring the ball to the throwing hand should be worked on.

An extension of catching the baseball is fielding balls that are hit to players during a game. The following are drills to incorporate fielding into your practices.

Drills

Work on good ready position – feet shoulder width apart, hands out in front at waist level with palms up (not on ground to start), slight bend in knees and at waist.

Play catch.

Ground balls – slide laterally to get into position in front of ball, hands drop to ground with both hands out in front (ball should be fielded out in front, not between legs), knees bent, head up – then shift into proper throwing position either by moving feet or by “crow hopping” (a short hop) into throwing position (i.e. sideways, as described above)

Pop flies – tough at this age for many kids – one good drill is to use tennis balls and either throw or hit them with a tennis racket, which helps get start to judge balls hit into the air and reduces the fear/injury factor

Fielding Drills that incorporate throwing

Field ground balls at second base position and throw to first – then graduate to shortstop position over time.

Line kids up at second base position and another line at shortstop – roll ground ball to either one and have other cover second for a force out at second, with fielder working on fielding ball and then making a proper easy underhand or short overhand flip (work on making it catchable).

Hit pop flies and have kids throw to second base.

3. Batting

Hitting a baseball is one of the most difficult things to do in sports (if not the most difficult). That said, what is even more difficult is teaching the art (and science) of hitting. Teaching hitting requires a step by step approach and a lot of patience.

There are many different ways to teach hitting. The approach we prefer is a ground up approach, literally.

1. Stance (feet, knees, hips, shoulders, head, eyes)
2. Hands (positioning of hands on bat and grip)
3. Bat position

The first step in the process of teaching hitting will not require a bat. Most coaches want to go straight to the bat to teach. However, the process should begin with the batter's stance.

At the T-ball and Farm levels start by showing the kids where to set up in relation to the plate. Then, from there, you can begin to teach the proper stance.

Again, many coaches teach different methods. One method is to teach the kids to get into a balanced, athletic stance. That can be accomplished by having the kids do the following:

- a. Have them set their feet an equal distance away from the plate (1 foot away from the plate to start), slightly wider than shoulder width apart. Toes must be pointed directly at the plate. (Make sure that there are no PIGEON TOES);
- b. Knees slightly bent;
- c. Shoulders square to the plate;
- d. Chest and shoulders over the knees; and
- e. Head facing pitcher's mound, both eyes should be fixed on mound.

- f. Hands up by rear shoulder (for now).

Once the coach goes through the stance (step by step) and then demonstrates it, he should have all of the kids line up (nicely spaced) with their back foot on one of the foul lines and their front foot pointed toward the mound. (If you have a mix of lefties and righties, some players may face each other.) Coaches should then check each child's stance looking for deficiencies such as back foot pointed toward the catcher, feet too close together, etc.

Once the kids have been shown their stance, it's time to pick up the bat. Another very important aspect of hitting is how a player grips the bat. When teaching how to properly grip a baseball bat, focus on the following:

1. Proper hand placement (bottom hand corresponds to front foot, top hand to back foot); and
2. When gripping a bat, the middle knuckles of each hand (not the top knuckles) should align.

After teaching the grip, hand and bat placement need to be addressed. The easiest way to teach bat placement is to have the kids get their feet situated, set their grip on the bat, and then have them lay the bat on their back shoulder.

Now the kids should lift the bat up two to three inches off of their shoulders and have the bat pointed up at a 45-degree angle. **NOW THEY ARE IN THEIR BATTING STANCE READY TO HIT.**

Rather than go into the mechanics of a swing, I would recommend the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS-PcxmaHmQ&t=33s>

This video is just one of many good resources that can be found on the internet.

Hitting Drills

- a. Hit off tee – you can do this into a backstop or tall fence to get more reps, or can have the other members of the group fielding and throwing batted balls toward a bucket or coach at the pitcher's mound – remember to avoid having all kids standing around in the field while one kid is batting

- b. Soft toss – also can do this into a fence or backstop – batter hits into the fence, coach is kneeling and faces batter about 5 feet away and in front of batter but off to the side opposite the hitter, “soft toss” ball underhanded toward and out in front of batter, who is in stance and in ready hitting position, to swing at ball and hit it into fence
- c. Also can use a larger ball – a kiddie soccer ball or a small beach ball to hit off tee – this emphasizes taking a good hard cut, especially for kids whose swings are tentative
- d. Hitting mechanics - focus on good stance and hand position

Other pointers:

1. Don't over-grip bat (i.e. hold it lightly but securely, don't begin the swing by choking the bat).
2. Line up second set of knuckles (i.e. the ones just above a ring, if you were wearing a ring) in hitting stance – many kids at this age over rotate their top hand (so that their first set of knuckles are lined up, i.e. the ones where your fingers start) – a proper grip is key for bringing the bat through the hitting zone properly.
3. Stride- some kids can start adding in a small step to start their swing – doesn't need to be (shouldn't be) a big step at this age which will just throw their swing off
4. Work on bat travelling through hitting zone on a level plane, finishing with a snap of the wrists
5. Follow through – wrists flip over after contact, and bat finishes AT OR ABOVE front shoulder (i.e. don't let swing stop out in front OR allow it to strike the front bicep).
6. Finally, and most importantly, at this and any age really – especially in the games – remind them to keep their eyes on the ball through the entire swing!

Practice Suggestions

1. Use stations during practice – Practices work best when kids are kept moving and engaged – to minimize standing around time, one idea that has worked fairly well in the past is to split the kids up into 3 or 4 groups during practice time
 - a. Have those groups rotate through various stations where a coach or two can work on a specific drill/skill(s) with them – see some suggested drills below
 - b. Stations can include the basics – throwing, fielding and hitting – also can occasionally mix in base running, sliding, etc.
 - c. If you have 3 or 4 stations and spend 15-20 min at each, that's a great 60-minute practice!

- d. After focusing on the mechanics in practice, end with something fun. For example, throwing and catching contests, fielding contests, hitting contests, etc.
- e. If at all possible, try to avoid having one kid hitting and the rest of the team standing around in the field waiting for him/her to hit it – this gets old fast for kids and coaches alike.
- f. Lastly, finish practice with base running. It gets the kids conditioning while learning a vital aspect game.

Thank you all for volunteering to teach our kids the greatest game in the world.