

# Lesson Plans for Youth Softball

Players in this age group need a variety of things from their coaches in order to be successful. This could be a make it or break it age in regards to continuing to play softball, switching to another sport or quitting athletics all together. I really hate to see the tournaments where a team plays 6-9 or more games in three days. I would not have had my college team play 9 games in a weekend so I really do not understand the logic of playing that many games with younger players especially under 14 year olds. Quantity does not equate to quality. Playing a lot does not mean the team or the player will be winners or improve their skills. Practice does make perfect when it comes to learning a skill. Practicing more along with learning the strategy of the game is something that every coach should strive for in their teachings. Playing too many games will lead to burnout, which also leads to the athletes leaving the game.

There are a lot of background things that need to be addressed before starting any drill work.

## Coordination Skills

Younger players need to work on their locomotor, non-locomotor and balance skills to teach them to be coordinated. Coaches should build this into their practices time especially at the beginning of the practice. New studies have shown that stretching before a game could actually be detrimental to the player's performance during that game. The trend is to eliminate the stretching as a group theory usually done in a circle and replace it with movement activities-now referred to as agility training.

Agility incorporates the locomotor skills that younger players need to become more coordinated. The following equipment would be the bare minimum for any team to have at their practices.

- Agility ladder (can be purchased or made with plastic pipe and rope, can also use player's gloves as the rungs to step over and around if needed)
- Cones or round discs

There is other equipment out there but a lot can be done with just those items. Work every practice on the following:

- Skipping
- Hopping
- High knee marching working into high knee jogging

- Carioca
- Sliding
- Galloping

These skills if worked on every practice will help the players learn proper and efficient movement. **Make sure the players have their toes slightly turned in while doing these activities and performing softball skills. This shifts the player's weight forward putting them on the balls of their feet, which makes them quicker. Players on their heels are slower.**

Also work on the player's strength by doing strength training on their arms and core.

- Wall/fence pushups with the feet 1-1 ½' away from the fence. Doing them standing up takes the strain off of their shoulders while increasing strength. Work up to doing these on the fingertips versus palms of the hands.
- A light weight at the end of a rope, which is tied around a short dole rod, provides a great exercise for the forearm. If the forearm is strong, the hands on the bat will be stronger along with helping the player's throwing. Standing up straight, hold the arms straight out with the rod in the hands. Roll the rope up until the weight is to the rod and slowly let it back out again.
- Many exercises are available to work on core strength, chose some and vary them each practice.

## **Things to consider when working with younger players**

1. It is extremely important to be positive with younger players. Corrections need to be made in order to teach the correct skills but the tone of the voice and actions are extremely important. Always be positive, when a player doesn't do it exactly right, how about the coach saying "that is pretty good but let's try it this way". Make the correction and have them try again. Keep correcting in a positive way and they will learn. Be negative, "Don't do it that way, what's wrong with you, do it this way", "No, no, no, that is all wrong" and they will stop listening, not want to practice and may eventually quit.

**Remember, they are kids that need guidance to perform the skill correctly. But you will get more from the players if you are positive with them, consistent in what you want and what you do, firm in your beliefs, knowledgeable about what you are teaching them and genuinely care about each one. Do not be unorganized and do not be a push over but correct in a positive.**

2. Younger players get tired quickly but recover quickly so they may need frequent but short breaks.
3. Younger players do better in group practice sessions so instead of having one or two long lines for example for fielding practice, have 5-6 shorter lines. Young players do not like to practice with everyone watching them. The fewer eyes on them the better when they are trying to learn something new.
4. If running is part of the practice, do not count by laps since the same kids will come in first and the same kids will come in last. That is embarrassing and kids will quit because of it. It also leads to bullying by some of the kids that are early maturers and termed the athletes at that age. Instead of having them start at the same place where they have the same start and finish area, have them start at various spots and have them run for time versus laps. Better yet, some running can be done at the beginning of practice during the agility drills, some during base-running practice and even more during infield practice. As they progress and get older, having runners on base while having infield practice helps the infielders see if they are getting to the ball and throwing fast enough to get a runner. Plus it helps teach the players doing the base-running how to read the defense and take the extra base.
5. Do not try to teach everything at once. Teach a couple of skills, practice those skills, teach another and practice all of the skills, continue until all skills are taught. When teaching, provide the instruction and feedback related to the skill. Practice really does make perfect.
6. There should be one ball for every two players at least.

### **Sequence of Learning the Skills**

1. Throwing—start with the overhand throw and progress into underhand, sidearm and pitching
2. Short fly balls and progressed to long fly balls, fly balls to each side and over the head
3. Ground balls directly at them and progress to side to side throws and short ones in front
4. Base-running—work on running on the balls of the feet with a slight lean forward and the arms pumping forward and back never side to side

5. Hitting and bunting—work on how to hold the bat with proper grip (make sure the bat is light enough for them to swing), attacking the ball out in front of the plate and stepping to the pitch.

Anytime you are hitting or throwing to a player in a practice situation, the coach must realize the skill of each player. Each player's skill level will vary so the coach has to know what that level is in order to hit or throw to the player where they can handle it. If one player is an early mature and can throw and fielding correctly, the hits to them can be harder. If not, the hits should be so that player can handle them. From that starting point for each player, the coach can now hit harder and harder so that the player improves little by little each at their own pace and skill level. To hit to the players the same type of ball, the better ones will not improve if the hits are too easy. If the hits are too hard, the better player will flourish but the weaker ones will be “ducking” the hit. If they are struggling, stop, teach it again, go back to a comfortable level so they are successful and then start making it tougher again.

At this age, there are early or late maturers. Early maturers are your natural athletes at this age and they are better than the others. Late maturers will struggle at this age and need to be “nursed” along with lots of positive talk, etc. I am not talking about special treatment or babying anyone, the coach just needs to know when and how to push those players to be better. A coach also has to watch the early maturers so that they do not bully the late maturing athletes. It is well known that those kids can be cruel to those who lack the talent at that point in their lives.

Those “natural athletes” or early maturers may or may not level off in their skill level. Many, when they get to be 15 or so now become a lower-level player and the late maturers start getting better and eventually catch up and pass them in skill level.

**Side Note: That is why early verbal commitments to a college for players prior to their junior year is not a good thing for the player, parent or college coach.**

**In the next newsletter from JUGS, I will focus on drills for younger players.**