

Keys to Getting the Most Out of Kids

Building a Foundation to Effectively Coach Our Players

Every coach wants kids to respond positively to their instruction and improve. We want our team to play well and win as many games as possible. Fans come to watch at every level of baseball, and it is much more enjoyable for them to observe a team that plays well and reflects improvement as the season moves along. Any coach is well aware that good play and mistakes reflects upon the job they are doing with kids, and it is difficult not to take criticism personally. So what are essentials to help us enjoy improvement more and endure complaints less frequently? Answering this question will be the purpose of a series of articles on the topic of getting the most out of the kids we coach.

James Michener wrote in his book "Sports in America" a very important truth. "Athletics does not build character, it exposes it." Often we express the notion that baseball or softball will benefit those who play, as if that is true for everyone simply because they sign up and put on a uniform. This is not the case. It is also not true that simply signing up to coach means we are going to influence kids in a positive manner. It will completely depend upon the way that we perform with our players if they have a positive or a negative experience. Good coaching allows kids to improve and learn how the game works. Skill and baseball/softball IQ's grow under quality leadership. We begin coaching wanting this to be the case and to enjoy the benefit of doing a good job. But what must we do to make sure this actually happens?

First, we must get honest with ourselves. Why are we taking on the challenge of coaching a baseball or softball team? It is easy to say that we want to make a positive difference in the life of our players, and we want to pass on our love of the game of baseball or softball to them. The best part of us can say that and mean it at the beginning of a season. But once the games begin, we must acknowledge that a genuine challenge must be overcome or our best intentions will not happen. More often than not in youth baseball, our kids don't improve that much and a life long love of the game is not developed. Players are quitting baseball and softball more and more often before they ever enter high school. Why?

The Elephant in the Room

If we personalize kids mistakes, if we see a loss as something that makes us as a coach a "failure", it will be very difficult to be the type of person that can really help players improve. I can honestly say that the competitive "instinct" within me had to battle these thoughts and feelings very hard when I began coaching. They just seem to naturally appear when our team struggles on the field. They never, entirely left me. Most coaches have had enough success and enjoyed it that they decide to take on the challenge of coaching in the first place. This "competitive instinct" is not a bad thing, but if it is not acknowledged and controlled it can ruin our effectiveness. Noting the challenge is the first critical step towards becoming an effective coach. If we ignore this and pretend it cannot hinder our coaching effectiveness, it becomes "the elephant in the room" that blocks good instruction and positive team chemistry from happening!

Personalizing mistakes and losses can lead to coaches getting defensive. Once this happens, the focus of player improvement and effective teaching takes a back seat. It is now time for mental energy and actions that deny responsibility, minimize the value of the game, and blame others. Let the excuses begin. My kids are not coachable. Parents are not doing a good enough job. The umps stink. The facilities are not good enough. My assistants are not reliable—etc., etc., etc. This leadership model can never be effective. Ever! It teaches our players to do the same thing when they fail. No one gets better. No one owns the need to work and improve. No one, really, is having a very good time. What does it take to break this cycle?

Critical Steps to Create a Foundation to Succeed

First, we must NOT make ourselves as coaches the “center of the universe”. We aren’t! The focus of our mental and physical energy needs to be our players. This is a non-negotiable! What do they need from us when they fail? What do they need from us when they win or when they lose? We must acknowledge that we are doomed to fail as soon as the focus is “us” and not our kids! How can we make this happen?

When every season begins, take the time to get to know each and every one of your players. What are their interests? Why are they playing the sport? How motivated are they to improve? What are their goals for the season? We must begin by understanding who each of our kids are and begin to understand what motivates them. Some of our players will have a real passion for the game. Some will be there because their parents are making them, or because their friends are playing. If we do not take the time to know these things, we will be instructing in a vacuum. Until we show each player we are interested in them as people, they have no way to understand that we are there to help them. We must establish this traction to be a “player centered” coach. It helps to nickname our kids. This is their unique identity that comes over time. Once you think you have a good nickname, check with the player to make sure they like it. A relationship is now established!

Second, let players know why you are coaching. Be clear why you love the game enough to offer your time to them. Make sure that they realize that your instruction is going to be offered *because their improvement matters to you!* The difference between “constructive criticism” and “negative criticism” is the way that the player receives instruction! If they believe the coaches intention is positive and the information being offered is for their own good and offered respectfully, they will respond well. At times if improvement is not happening, it can really help to ask a player “what can I do to help you more effectively”? Even if they do not know, the conversation clearly shows that you respect your players and want them to succeed. This is the 21st century. Do not make the mistake of assuming that since you are in charge they will enjoy being told what to do. If young people today feel an adult is “talking down to them” in a condescending manner, they will not respond well. Mutual respect between player and coach must be established.

Finally, we must demonstrate the regard we have for our players is not dependent upon perfect performance. After all, that is impossible. Baseball and softball are games where failure is inevitable. Frustrating as mistakes are, especially when publicly happening in games, they must not be connected to our respectful regard for our players as people. Their value as human beings must not fluctuate depending upon how well they play. Kids are delicate. They are likely to think “all or nothing” depending on if they got hits or not: if they made plays or not!

Only the coach can create an environment that can take the sting of a poor performance and turn it into an opportunity to grow and improve. The art of coaching is not wanting failure AND using it effectively to determine future practice plans and reworking how we relate to our kids to help them improve. Some players need encouragement and patience, others need to be challenged and offered homework. All of them must know that we care, win or lose.

Conclusion and Thought Questions

Coaches do not start a season with the goal of giving our kids a poor experience and having them quit the sport. Human nature, however, is exposed by public competition. It is much easier to criticize mistakes others make than it is to avoid these same errors ourselves. If coaches personalize the mistakes of players and losing, the defensive reactions that follow can ruin our chance to be effective leaders of young people. A commitment to caring about our kids as human beings, regardless of how well they play begins with getting to know them individually, and cultivating a respectful relationship with each one. Once this is done, our instruction can be offered in a way that is constructive and appropriate. Unless this is accomplished, we are trying to build a team without a foundation. "A wise man builds his house upon a rock"! Mutual respect allows us to admit our mistakes and then work on them. That is the bedrock of effective coaching!

Each article will conclude with questions for thoughtful reflection. Please begin a coaching journal that takes the ideas offered in this article and personalizes them for you as a coach. Only then will you truly benefit from moving learning from understanding to application!

How competitive are you? How hard will it be for you to accept mistakes and losses without taking it out on your players? How sensitive are you to other people? How hard will it be for you to tell players how to improve and risk their feelings being hurt? What is the right combination of caring about doing well and competing hard AND respectfully caring about each of our players and making sure they have a positive experience?

Then: What makes constructive criticism positive; what allows kids to see it as an effort to make them better players and people? Why is criticism so often perceived as negative and make kids defensive and not follow the instruction? How can these answers help you make suggestions more effectively with your players?