

Tips for running practices with very young players

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If you've volunteered, (or have been volunteered), to coach a team of young players, there are a few techniques you can employ that may make your practice sessions more productive and enjoyable. Coaching kids this age doesn't have to be glorified baby-sitting, if you take the proper approach.

1. Choosing Your Words

There are many coaches who seem to have difficulty bringing themselves down to their players' levels. Have you ever watched someone give a speech and realized no one in the audience was listening? Yet the speaker continued to drone on, reading from notes, either oblivious to or not caring about the reaction. Many coaches tend to do the same thing, unaware that their intended message is not getting through. With very young players, a sure way to miss your mark is by choosing words that you believe are universally understood, but which the youngsters don't get. I was once helping a fellow out coaching girls 6U softball and he kept hollering at one player to "cover first!" He was getting increasingly frustrated that she wouldn't do it. I approached her quietly and asked her if she knew what "cover first" meant. She meekly shook her head, "no." I explained that it meant to stand with one foot on the base and try to catch the ball if it was thrown to her. Now she understood. Examples in other sports might be telling players in soccer to "Mark," a player or "Play" or "Cross" the ball – all common soccer terms, but "Guard" or "Pass" or even "Kick" may be more at their level. Basketball players around kindergarten age might not know what the "Baseline" or the "Elbow" are.

2. Use Humor

Very often, coaches, (who are respected members of their communities), feel awkward trying out jokes and silly humor for fear they'll look silly. But little kids love it. When choosing teams, naming one the Wiggling Worms and another the Creepy Spiders might seem lame, but it conveys the important message to your players that you're not taking this too seriously and that fun is encouraged.

3. But Mean Business

Kids will know immediately if they can walk all over you. They'll test your boundaries and the more you let them get away with, the more practice will disintegrate into nothing more than day-care. This doesn't mean you have to yell and reduce them to tears, but if you're having fun, joking around and then have to get serious and say to a child, "Hey, come on now. You want to keep practicing with the rest of us don't you?," you'll usually see them shape up in a hurry. And, if there does need to be an occasional "time out" for a player, so be it. He won't spend too much time watching the rest of the team have fun before he's out with you on his best behavior making sure he gets to be included.

4. Play Games

Make everything you do a competition. Divide the team into smaller teams. Which team can catch the most fly-balls in two minutes? Which team can pass the ball to each other the most times? If you were running a kid's birthday party and you had 45 minutes to entertain them on the field before cake and ice cream, you wouldn't force them all to stand around while you demonstrated techniques or took players one-by-one through boring drills? You'd have a distance-throw competition, see who could kick it the farthest, races down and back with the ball, etc. Many of those same principles come in handy when you're trying to make an hour-long practice with energetic 6 year-olds fly by too. When it's not going well, that 45-60 minute practice can seem like an eternity. But when it's done right, there is nothing more satisfying than running a great practice for little ones, and having them beg to stay a little longer when time's up.