

Youth Baseball Coaching: A High-Level Guide

This manual is designed to help dedicated baseball coaches provide a **positive, development-based experience** for young athletes, serving as a blueprint for building a productive environment and a call to action for improving the youth baseball experience. The core principles emphasize **enjoyment of the game and the best interests of the athletes**.



1. The Coach: Philosophy and Conduct

As a coach, you are one of the most influential people in your athletes' lives, creating an atmosphere of positivity and fun. The primary reason kids play a sport is for **fun**, and the main reason they drop out is that it's no longer fun.

- **Coaching Philosophy:** Develop and write down your coaching philosophy. **Being adaptive in your leadership style is highly effective.** Legendary coaches often possess good listening skills, patience, clear expectations, strong organizational skills, the ability to cultivate meaningful relationships, and excellent communication.
- **Code of Conduct:**
 - **Never place the value of winning above fostering the highest desirable ideals of character.**
 - Strive to set an example of the **highest ethical and moral conduct** in all interactions.
 - **Prohibit bench jockeying, personal remarks, cursing, and obscene language** towards opponents, umpires, or spectators.
 - **Treat umpires with respect and support**, and do not indulge in conduct that incites athletes or spectators against them. **Public criticism of umpires or athletes is unethical.**
 - **Never engage in sexual harassment, abuse, or any other harassment.**
 - Be committed to having a **constructive impact** on athletes, understanding health and safety, and maintaining the game's integrity.

2. Health and Safety: A Top Priority

Keeping the game safe and enjoyable for your athletes should always be a top priority.

- **Basic First Aid:**
 - Emergencies and injuries are unpredictable, so having a **controlled plan and resources** is crucial.
 - **Recognizing when athletes are injured is a critical responsibility.**
 - Each coach or facility should have a **basic first aid kit**, including bandages, antiseptic wipes, instant cold pack, pain reliever, scissors, tweezers, first aid guide, and disposable gloves.

- **If an athlete is struck by a baseball, check on them.** For swelling or bleeding, remove them from the game. For minor scrapes/cuts, provide on-site medical attention and assess return to play. For **major injuries (e.g., broken bones), keep the athlete in place and seek professional medical attention.**
- Any athlete struck in the head should **be removed from activity and examined by a medical professional for a concussion** as soon as possible, with required rest before returning.
- **Pitcher's Arm Care:**
 - **Always ask pitchers when they last threw and how much.**
 - **Pay close attention to pitchers warming up;** if an arm looks sore, talk to them and decide if they should compete.
 - **If a pitcher says their arm hurts, remove them from the game to rest.**
 - If you notice a pitcher **grabbing their elbow or shoulder, or favoring their arm, call timeout and remove them.**
 - Minimize catch time immediately before and after pitching.
 - **Prioritize the athlete's long-term arm health over game setting and scoreboard.**
 - Adhere to **age-appropriate pitch count and rest guidelines**

3. The Big Picture: Creating a Positive Experience

Sports are impactful vehicles for character development. Taking a step back to view the big picture helps guide your perspective.

- **Keeping a Positive and Fun Environment:** Athletes achieve more when having fun. Praise skills, allow athletes to be loose (while on task), encourage discussion, and mix in fun competition-driven games/drills.
- **Prioritizing Sportsmanship:** Teach athletes what sportsmanship is: playing fair, honesty, following rules, **respecting officials, coaches, teammates, and opponents at all times**, and treating others as you wish to be treated.
- **Being an Encourager:** Provide specific, truthful praises to build confidence.

4. Planning: Pre-Season, Practices, and Games

Successful experiences come down to planning.

- **Development Through Practice:** Follow developmentally appropriate programs and activities for various age levels to cultivate skills.
- **Practice Planning:** Practice time should make up **a majority of your team's field time** (if possible).
 - **Goals:** Provide an **efficient, productive, and purposeful training session** that allows every athlete to improve mentally, emotionally, and physically, in a safe and positive environment. Individual practices can have specific, skill-based goals. Communicate goals at the start.

- **Preparation:** Arrive prepared with an **organized written practice plan** (including drills and time frames).
- **Focus on Development and Fun:** Teach fundamentals, provide constructive feedback, and **prioritize athlete development and fun over winning.**
- **USA Baseball Mobile Coach App:** A free tool for practice planning, drill libraries, and access to educational resources.
- **Skill Development:** Utilize USA Baseball's Online Education Courses and Community Coaches Clinics for insights into teaching skills and building confidence.
- **Basic Throwing Program:** A staple of practice. Proper arm care and warm-ups are important for all athletes. Emphasize good throwing form, accuracy, and proper cool-down.
- **Flexibility:** Evaluate each practice and be flexible to adjust. Involve coaching staff and ask athletes for feedback.
- **Embrace Failure:** Teach athletes to embrace failure, learn from it, and move on, turning it into a fun challenge.
- **Game Planning:**
 - **Goals:** Focus on **development and enjoyment** over winning. Help athletes master and successfully perform skills learned in practice.
 - **Strategy:** Provide athletes with experience in a variety of positions, matching skills to positions to build confidence. **Develop strategy around your talent,** don't force talent to fit strategy.
 - **Key Game Day Items:** Prepare lineups, substitution plans (involving all athletes), and pitching rotations (adhering to Pitch Count limits and required rest days) in advance.
 - **Pre-Game Warm Up:** Have a plan for arrival, stretching, hitting practice, and bullpen work (depending on player age, availability of facilities, and available time).
 - **Coach Behavior:** Athletes react to your management and behavior. Keep your approach **positive and process-driven,** maintaining a sense of humor.
 - **Respect for Others:** Address how athletes should respectfully interact with umpires, opposing teams, and coaches.
- **In-Game Management:**
 - **Avoid over-coaching;** let athletes test what they've learned in practice and make decisions on their own, especially between innings.
 - **Pitching Staff:** Help pitchers develop a strategy and core principles. **Monitor for fatigue and discomfort,** and encourage open communication.
 - **Postgame Team Meeting:** Keep meetings **short, positive, purposeful, and to the point.** Highlight positives, briefly discuss negatives (sandwiching criticism between praise), and use game performance to identify areas for the next practice.

5. The Team: Culture, Environment, and Inclusivity

A positive team dynamic enhances athlete development.

- **Team Culture:** Culture is the way you and your team do things regularly. **Good leadership distinguishes between individual and team goals.** Instill responsibility, accountability, and good habits. Involve athletes in establishing team values and goals.
- **Team Environment:**
 - **Maintain Respect and Safety:** Model appropriate behavior, set standards, avoid explicit language, and ensure proper safety equipment.
 - **Show Care Towards Athletes:** Engage in team-building activities and initiate team gatherings (if possible).
 - **Provide Support and Recognition:** Be supportive when athletes struggle and recognize good performance to build confidence.
 - **Develop Trust:** Coaches must trust athletes, and athletes must trust coaches.
 - **Treat Athletes Fairly:** All athletes must be treated equally and fairly, regardless of talent.
 - **Promote Cohesion:** The team should operate as one unit, with a sense of belonging.
- **Inclusivity:** Baseball is for everyone, regardless of race, color, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender, or national origin. Provide a **safe, respectful, positive, and competitive environment for all.** Give the same level of respect to everyone, never tolerate belittling language, recognize and mentor each athlete, and display empathy.
- **Benefits of Playing Multiple Sports:** Encourage athletes to play other sports in the off-season. This reduces overuse injuries, develops all-around skills, enhances mental skills, builds confidence, teaches life skills, avoids burnout, offers new competitive experiences, and broadens social circles.
- **Athlete Responsibilities:** Involve athletes in the upkeep and care of the facility as an act of service and to teach responsibility.
- **Managing Conflicts (Athlete & Coach):**
 - Clearly communicate athlete roles to prevent confusion.
 - Be consistent and fair in philosophy and discipline to minimize team chemistry issues.

6. The Parents/Guardians

The coach-parent/guardian relationship is a key factor in team success.

- **Communication:** Maintain open lines of communication. Provide contact information, set clear rules for addressing concerns (at the season opening meeting), share detailed schedules, and establish an email group.
- **Coaching Your Own Child:** Treat your child fairly, like all other teammates. **Prioritize your off-field relationship** over your on-field relationship. Avoid spotlighting them in a single priority position and provide equitable development opportunities.
- **Parent/Guardian Involvement:**
 - Keep all relationships with parents professional and neutral.
 - Encourage parents to attend practices and workouts.
 - Encourage volunteering for team snacks, scorekeeping, or other roles.

- During games, parents should enjoy as spectators and allow coaching staff to coach. **Sideline behavior should be kept positive.**
 - **Managing Conflicts (Parents/Guardians):**
 - **Establish the relationship and clear guidelines at the season opening meeting.**
 - Clearly state **acceptable issues for discussion** (typically, playing time, positions, and lineup order should *not* be discussed unless the coach initiates it).
 - State proper times for meetings; after games is generally not ideal. The coach should choose the time and place.
 - The **athlete should be present** in coach-parent meetings to ensure accurate communication and to learn conflict resolution.
 - Meetings must be productive. Coaches should listen calmly. The **athlete should always be the major focus**. Avoid comparisons to other athletes.
 - Have **another coach present** in parent/guardian-coach meetings to verify discussion.
-

This manual serves as a valuable resource to support coaches in their mission to provide a positive, development-based, and fun experience for youth baseball athletes. It's is a consolidation of a far longer document made available by USA Baseball via their website.