



All kids like to play games. Coaches enjoy the excitement and competition of the games as well. For the most part, however, games do not provide many opportunities for teaching. While there is some time between innings when your team is hitting or during pre- and post-game huddles when you can address your players, the game atmosphere is just not as conducive to teaching as practice. Chapter 5 from the Babe Ruth League Coaching Education and Certification Program offered by ASEP teaches you how to define teachable moments during games and how to use practice to learn from situations that arise in games. You will also learn how to make practices more productive and examine how to make practicing fundamental skills more enjoyable for your players.

CHAPTER 5 - THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE AND PRACTICE PLANNING

Make It Fun:

The best way to teach baseball is to make it fun. On the surface that means we should let the kids play games, which is important from both an enjoyment and a developmental standpoint. Still, when it comes to developing young baseball players, from T-ball right up through high school, the importance of practice, even during the season, cannot be underestimated.

The Right Time to Correct Mistakes:

When correcting mistakes made during your games, instead of singling out a player or situation and trying to correct a mistake right after it happens on the field in full view of everyone, wait until the inning is over. Then pull as many players aside as possible to discuss what happened and how it can be corrected the next time. Remember that a lot of distractions occur during games, so maintaining your team's attention can be challenging. When teaching a lesson or correcting a mistake, do so in a spot that is relatively removed from parents and other spectators. Chances are that the excitement will take away from the kids' ability to absorb all of the information.

Although it's good to go over these situations after they happen, the best time to teach is during practice. Kids seem to have the ability to let go of the moment and not dwell on what has just taken place. They are pretty good about looking ahead to their next activity. If you rehash every detail of the game during the contest or as soon as it is over, you run the risk of overloading your players with information and zapping the enjoyment from the game experience. Maintain a journal or notebook with a detailed list of situations and mistakes to address the next practice. Try your best to re-create the situations and present them as areas that the team needs to improve rather than point out mistakes made by one or two individuals.

Use Practices For Learning:

Clearly the best time to address situations that occur in games and to perfect areas of play that need work is during practice. Leagues that only play games can really hurt the development of their young players. Even the more advanced travel teams that play 50 or 60 games during the spring and summer may be hurting their players' development at times because they play too many games and don't have enough time to address skill development and team fundamentals in a practice setting. Big league players go through six weeks of spring training for good reasons. The players must get their repetitions in, refine their fundamental skills, and develop their team strategies and philosophies over a long period of time, because once the season begins, they play almost every day. For kids, however, six weeks of practice without playing usually is not practical. Field availability, inclement weather and team members' involvement in other sports can limit the amount of preseason practice time a team gets.

Right up through high school, to college, and even at the professional level, the process of learning on the diamond is a continual one. Baseball and softball are crazy games. Every year during the Major League season we see plays that we never have seen before. Big league players are the best in the world at what they do, and because they play so many games, they often have to learn on the fly. At the lower levels of baseball and softball we have the luxury of re-creating any new or unusual situations that arise in a practice setting to make sure that all of the tangible lessons can be absorbed. For kids, having the opportunity to break the situation down into understandable parts and to explain why each player involved in the play should react in a certain way is an invaluable learning opportunity. If you have your team do nothing but play games, it becomes very difficult for you to do any teaching, because you always react to events that occur in the heat of battle.

Practice gets a bad rap for being boring and tedious. So many fine motor skills must be mastered to play the sport – throwing, catching, hitting and so on – that fundamental skill development is a must. Whether you are a budding youth player or Alex Rodriguez, you have to be able to throw the ball, catch the ball and hit the ball to be successful. And, whether you are a novice or Alex, to be successful you should follow the exact same fundamental approaches. When instructing young players, you have them work on these simple fundamentals over and over. Why? Because those are the same fundamentals that Alex Rodriguez has worked on from the time he was playing recreational ball right up to this very day. Baseball and softball's fundamentals are very simple; the complexities of the game come with the various strategies and team fundamentals that are incorporated as we get older and the game becomes more serious.

Games provide kids with a fun, competitive atmosphere that is necessary to maintain their interest and attention. However, kids just don't get enough repetitions in games to develop the fundamental skills necessary to improve. You can introduce and practice the basic fundamentals during practice in a lot of fun ways. There is no question that fundamental drills can become tedious. Kids are not wired to be able to perform the same simple tasks over and over again without shifting their focus or attention. By breaking the kids into small groups and rotating them to different stations every 15 or 20 minutes, you can break up the monotony of practice.

Remain Goal Oriented:

Always design practices keeping in mind age-specific goals. When developing a series of practices or a season plan, it is important to understand the philosophy of skill development, which includes introducing and demonstrating a skill, using buzzwords and catch phrases to help kids remember, explaining why the skill or drill is important, letting the kids attempt the skill, correcting mistakes through conversation and demonstration, and reviewing and refining until the skill is mastered.

Any coach who successfully passes the Babe Ruth League Coaching Education and Certification Program will receive a certification that is *valid for their entire coaching career with Babe Ruth League, Inc.* If you haven't already done so, please visit www.BabeRuthCoaching.org to gain your *lifetime certification!*