

FIELDING

In youth baseball a major problem with players in the field is that they are not ready for the ball that is hit to them. Standing upright, crossing their arms and/or legs, looking away and daydreaming are often evident in kids. This results not only in misplays but can lead to injury for unsuspecting kids.

Stance: A good defensive stance is one where the player's feet are slightly wider than their shoulders. The player should always take a step *forward* as the pitch is being delivered. As they step forward, they should bend at the waist and lower their glove toward the ground, palm open. Their balance should be on the balls of the feet, not the heels. Their weight should be evenly distributed, enabling them to go either left or right.

Anticipation: Players should always expect that the ball will be hit to them. (Yes there are some that will dread this prospect.) **Get the players into thinking of situations. Verbally cue individual players with questions. Make them think: (If a ball is hit on the ground, in the air, a line drive?); or Where are the base-runners?**

Constantly repeating this to your players in the field will help to prevent indecision by your players when the ball is hit their way.

FIELDING DRILLS

In devising defensive drills try to keep the kids constantly involved and provide multiple repetitions so that they can practice and master good habits. Utilize assistant coaches or parent volunteers to keep things moving. Do not have kids standing around for stretches of time. Keep those fielders busy. I would not get too complicated in putting together fielding drills for young kids. Innovation and creativity are great, but repetition is the key here at this level...Refer back to the Throwing & Catching Drills in putting together a majority of your practices.

GROUND BALLS

Line Drill: Set up your fielders in rows. Have 2, 3 or 4 stations to keep the lines short. Hit or roll the 1st player on a line 5 ground balls and have them throw the ball back to you. When he is done he rotates to the back of the line and the next kid jumps up. Check to see that your fielders are staying low. Have them work on staying "under the ball." Knees should be flexed, rear ends down, hands out in front of their body in receiving the grounder. The feet should be slightly wider

than the player's shoulders. Watch that the player doesn't turn his head away when fielding the grounder. With young and unskilled players, you may find that using tennis balls and then gradually working up to regulation balls is the way to go.

This drill is good in that it can be done indoors and out, on a field, parking lot or driveway. It does not require much space but can provide dozens of repetitions in a short amount of time. You can isolate stance and fielding flaws and build confidence in fielders who might be frightened of the ball. Start easy and work your way up to harder-hit balls. There is no surer way to lose a young player than to hit grounders too hard, too soon and they get hit with it.

Wall Drill: Line up your players 15-20 feet apart facing a wall 20 feet away. Using tennis or rubberized balls, have the players throw their ball against the wall. Presto! Instant grounder. Kids can get literally dozens of balls in this fashion. This drill is good for eye/hand coordination and you can check to see how the kids set up on grounders. Make contests for the most consecutive ground balls caught and encourage the kids to do this drill on their own.

Infield practice: Set the players up on the infield at 1st, 2nd, short and 3rd. Have a catcher behind the plate and a pitcher at the mound. The coach hits ground balls from home plate to all of the positions. Have the kids field and practice making regulation throws. Keep rotating kids in and out of positions until they have all played every position. This drill will show you what kids are capable of the longer throws and will get them used to the routines of infield play. Keep backups at all the positions as you can expect misplays and overthrows. (It's normal in lower level ball.) Keep all the kids involved by rotating often. Get the kids versed in playing several positions. Don't lock them into only one spot on the field. You can expand this drill by including outfielders and having them throw to bases and utilizing them as cut offs. You may also choose to include baserunners. This introduces the element of situational play to your players. Bunts, force plays, double plays and run downs can all be simulated for the players to recognize and react to. Using runners makes the drill more competitive and forces the fielders to respond to game-like pressure. It also provides valuable base-running practice and is fun. With younger players it is expected that runners will be safe most of the time as the throwing and fielding skills of the defensive players are not yet fully developed. Watch for improvement however, and as defensive players gradually get better, the frequency of outs will increase. Don't let the players get discouraged. I have used a drill like this for 30 to 45 minutes and the kids have great fun with all aspects of it.

Controlled scrimmage: Put kids out into positions on the field. Have the coach pitch as to guarantee strikes. Let batters hit and have the fielders respond to the plays accordingly. This is a great time to work on anticipation. Have the kids tell you what they will do with the ball if it's hit to them. It is important for the fielders to see pitched balls hit off of the bat. It is different than balls that are simply fungoed by the coach. This drill also provides batting and base-running practice for your players. Again, gauge your players abilities. If they can't play catch safely and effectively, can't do the line drill, scrimmaging is unrealistic. Keep the players rotating around into different positions. Have runners wear helmets and have fun.

FLY BALLS

Exercise great caution when teaching young kids how to catch fly balls. Start by using tennis balls or Softee Balls and toss, don't hit, them at your players. (I witnessed a well-meaning coach hit hard balls at 8-year-old kids and it resulted in a broken nose for one of the youngsters.) Tread carefully. Catching fly balls is an art that takes a long time to acquire. Realize that many kids have a fear of the baseball, particularly those up over their head. Teach them to keep their glove fingers up and their arms extended in front of them.

Quarterback Drill: Give each kid a ball. Have them (one at a time) run up to you and have them flip you the ball. They then run approximately 50 feet and you lob a ball up for them to catch. As ability increases, increase the length and height of the throws. (TIP: Encourage the kids to run on the balls of their feet. Kids who run on their heels have a tendency to bounce and it makes it difficult for them to track the ball.)

RELAYS

RELAY DRILL: Divide your kids into teams of 4-5 kids to a team. Each team should create a straight line with the players positioned approximately 50 feet apart. The object of each team is to throw to the next player in their line until the ball goes all the way down to the end of the line and back. The thrower should be using the next fielders chest as his target. Accuracy is paramount. High, wide or bounced throws make for poor relays. Also look that players are turning to their glove side when throwing the ball to the next player on the line. (Right hand throwers spin to their left, Left hand throwers spin to their right.) Have fun by having the teams race each other. Players will learn very early that dropped or wild throws will cause them to lose the race. Winners get bubble gum?