



AT BAT

with Jack Perconte

Common Youth Baseball Dilemmas; Answering Your Frequently Asked Questions

Recently, I was hanging around the batting cage before a ball game as a father was pitching to his young son. The first thing the dad said to his son was, "Why don't you ever do that in the game?" after a good hit and the second thing, "I don't want to ever see you do that again," after the young hitter lost balance after a swing. After a few innings in the game, the dad yells out "Hey 22, wake up out there" after his son made an error. I am sure that boy was having fun - not! I could only imagine the lecture the boy heard in the car on the way home after the game. The sad thing is, from what I observed, the young boy was a very talented ballplayer. I predict the boy will not play baseball into high school, unless the dad changes his tune. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence at the youth sports level. I have seen many talented players discontinue playing because the fun was zapped out of the game by a parent, or an adult coach.

Let's face it, baseball is a very tough game to succeed at, and frustration is inevitable for both players and parents. Even the best hitters are only successful a third of the time and the best pitchers are capable of throwing strikes about sixty percent of the time. No other sport requires the physical, technical, and mental expertise that baseball does. Maybe an argument that backs this up is that almost all major league players require further grooming in the minor leagues before reaching the majors, when in other sports they go right to the big time after college. That is a story for another day; nevertheless, baseball is a game that requires an enormous amount of repetition and mental preparation.

Which gets to the point – parents who want their kids to play baseball must be prepared for failure, and the resulting disappointment and frustration. Of course, I am not trying to discourage parents, nor kids, to play baseball, because it is the greatest game of all. However, parents and ballplayers must understand the realities of the game and display the necessary patience to give players the time to develop. More importantly, this patience is necessary so kids have fun playing the game, despite the inherent disappointments. At the youth levels, the batting success rate may be greater, but there is still failure, as with all sports.

Parents and coaches, who understand the difficulty of the game, are also helping kids' deal with future life adversity, and just as importantly, they are helping to keep the fun in the game, as it should be and despite the adversity. Many common youth baseball situations lead to decision-making and with the wrong choice, kids lose the fun or quit playing altogether. Those that

make the best choices, give kids the necessary time to develop. Additionally, good decisions allow players to decide when to "hang up the spikes," based on their choices and not based on overbearing adult influences.

As all ballplayers, I have had my share of baseball failure in my career, despite making it to the major leagues. I have also seen and dealt with numerous youth/adult interactions from my years of coaching and parenting. These experiences have helped me assist parents, coaches, and players to decide the best course of action with challenging baseball dilemmas. Of course, there is no one answer that fits all solutions. A trial and error approach is often necessary, as with most decision-making processes.

The most obvious answer to each dilemma involves practicing baseball skills more, and fundamentally correctly, with fun. All problem areas begin to diminish through the performance of the correct fundamentals, along with fun and more playing experience. Practice and experience allows players to trust their skills and focus more in games; add in the fun and players have the necessary ingredients for success.

However, this does not mean that parents should just say, "You have to practice more," or "Just have fun" every time their son or daughter struggles. Practicing with them in a positive way and finding knowledgeable coaches is a necessary solution.

Common Baseball Dilemmas

Hitting Issue 1: Adults believing that the lack of success is in the child's head, after all they can hit great in practice

Coaching Solution

1. Incorrect fundamentals are usually the cause of a lack of success, and those do not always show up in practice. Challenging hitters in practice with game like speeds, and change of speeds, helps. Adults should realize that unless players are scared of the ball or intimidated by the pitcher, it is not a head issue.
2. Build players' confidence by providing knowledge of the basics of hitting and by mentioning any little signs of improvement. Positive reinforcement goes a long way to keeping the fun in sports.
3. Never tell players that you (adult) believe it is in their head.

Hitting Issue 2: He/she has no power

Coaching Solution

1. Improve hitters' fundamentals – power is useless if hitters rarely square the ball up.

2. Swing the bat more – faster hands and hips develop the more players swing the bat.
3. Do age appropriate, full-body strengthening exercises to improve strength and athleticism.

Hitting Issue 3: Hitter cannot hit slow pitching

Coaching Solution

1. It actually takes better swing fundamentals and timing to hit slow pitching as players move up the baseball ladder, so it is always a good idea to work on slow pitching during batting practice, as well as game speeds.
2. Along the same lines, coaches should mix off-speed pitches in during batting practice.
3. Teach players to hit the ball in the direction of the pitch, regardless of the speed of the pitch.

Hitting Issue 4: Batter takes eye off ball

Coaching Solution

1. Perform drills that develop hitters' hands and hips – head flies because of long arm swings and over swinging.
2. Place an object or flash a number off to the opposite side of the hitter, requiring batters to see, before they look to find the batted ball.
3. Have hitters practice on a baseball-specific, balance beam – balance comes from head control. Improving balance helps control the eyes and overall body balance, both crucial to keeping the eyes on the ball.

Pitching Issue 1: Pitcher eases up to throw strikes in games

Coaching Solution

1. It is important to have players throw their hardest during pitching practice. I am not a proponent of the just throw strikes philosophy. Of course, if kids cannot throw strikes, they should not be pitching in games until they can prove they can. However, strong-armed kids should continue to practice pitching until they are more efficient and ready for game action.
2. Help kids concentrate on throwing to the catcher's glove without regard to the batter standing there – easier said than done, but necessary. Having catchers flash a number with their bare hand in practice, right before pitchers deliver the ball, helps pitchers maintain eye contact and focus on target.
3. Have hitters (or coach) stand in the batters' box during bullpen work with a helmet but no bat – this gives pitchers more game-like practice.

Pitching Issue 2: He cannot throw strikes

Coaching Solution

1. Improve throwing mechanics – pitching control often goes back to incorrect throwing habits.
2. Slow pitcher down a little – it is common for pitchers to get overly excited in games, which leads to rushing their deliveries; getting them to relax helps.
3. Pitch kids who want to pitch and can throw strikes, as opposed to the kids who have the strongest arms. Additionally, adults should not show displeasure when pitchers allow hits, as challenging hitters is the objective.

Pitching Issue 3: Son or daughter does not throw hard

Coaching Solution

1. Begin a long-term throwing program that involves at least 3 to 4 days of throwing per week, over an extended period – up to nine months out of the year.
2. Include rest days after maximum-throwing days – allowing the arm to recover and avoiding arm injury is crucial to throwing harder.
3. Shoulder strengthening exercises are beneficial to developing speed and avoiding overuse injuries.

Fielding issue 1: Player is scared of ball

Coaching Solution

1. Practice with a safety ball until players' glove work improves and confidence grows.
2. Along the same lines, put full catching gear on players for fielding

practice. Although cumbersome, this helps players feel protected until they lose the fear of being hurt by ball.

3. Always, begin with slowly hit balls in practice until players build good mechanics and confidence. Gradually increase speeds as players develop confidence but do not rush over-challenging fearful players.

•Note that these are possible solutions for batters too, who are scared of the pitched ball, another common occurrence in youth baseball.

Fielding Issue 2: Great hit no glove players

Coaching Solution

1. Start each practice with fielding practice and save hitting for the end of practice. Tell them the amount of time they are willing to work on fielding is the amount of time you will work with them on their hitting.
2. Allow kids to practice the position they like the best, even if it is not the position they play in games
3. Remind players that there is only one DH in a game, so having a position to play adequately, greatly increases their chances of having a longer playing career.

Fielding Issue 3: He is stuck playing the outfield every game

Coaching Solution

1. Explain to kids that outfield becomes more and more a vital position as the quality of ball improves and that many of the best athletes in baseball are outfielders.
2. Along with outfield practice, have players practice infield positions and pitching, when time allows. This may allow them to show coaches their ability to play elsewhere. In addition, players never know what position they might have the opportunity to play in high school when competition may be greater or less, so they should practice many positions when young.
3. Help players learn to "run them down" in the outfield, as well as the bases to back up and the correct bases to throw to. Coaches have difficulty finding young players who can judge fly balls and know the finer parts of outfield play. Learning these things can make outfielders stand out and very valuable to teams and coaches, especially as outfield becomes a higher priority position at the higher levels of baseball.

Finally, coaches who remain positive and creative with their coaching keep the fun in the game for all. Coaches who have fun practices by challenging kids, keeping them active and teaching them, give kids the best chance at success and with overcoming their deficiencies in all areas of the game, leading to less disappointment and frustration. [Check out Jack's books and other tips on his website at www.jackperconte.com.](http://www.jackperconte.com)

