

# T-Ball

## Coaching Handbook



Missouri Valley Family YMCA



## **Introduction**

Thank you for volunteering as a T-Ball coach at the Y!

Coaching youth baseball is an exciting and fulfilling way to engage with young athletes and make a lasting impact. However, we understand that it's not always easy—especially for first-time coaches at the T-Ball level. Many new coaches feel overwhelmed or uncertain about their responsibilities, and that's completely normal. Coaching goes beyond organizing practices and bringing equipment; it's about teaching fundamental skills, fostering sportsmanship, and serving as a positive role model for your players.

This handbook is designed to support you in your coaching journey. Inside, you'll find essential information on T-Ball rules, coaching techniques, and administrative guidance to help you navigate your role with confidence. It also includes practical drills to develop your players' skills in a fun and supportive environment.

The Missouri Valley Family YMCA sincerely appreciates your time, dedication, and commitment to our young athletes. Thank you for being part of their growth and for making a difference in our community!

Sincerely,

Cole Lafferty

YMCA Sports Director

## **How to Coach Young Children**

Coaching very young children is great fun. Three, four, five, and six year-olds are so enthusiastic it's hard not to have a good time at practice. But if you want to help them get the most out of practice and set a foundation for the future years to come, you should follow a few simple guidelines.

- **Set the Rules**

While older players need to be involved in rule-setting, three to six-year-olds need to be told what you want them to do. Without any rules, you will waste a lot of time trying to get their attention and you will end up feeling frazzled!

- **Have a Plan**

With organization come many benefits. Organized practices allow you to make the most out of any practice times that you have together. Plan your practice times to minimize any standing around. If they are active and having fun they are more apt to be focused.

- **When Coach is Talking**

Team talks are your opportunity to explain to your players what they are going to do next. Verbal instructions should be brief- no more than 10 seconds- and followed by a quick demonstration. But you need to make sure that all players are listening. So tell them that they can't listen and talk at the same time!

- **Keep Expectations Realistic**

You will probably have 10-12 kids on your team. The best you can hope for is that half of them will understand the game fairly well by the end of the season. Don't expect to take your team and create the world's best t-ball team. Anticipate teaching key skills, developing players and keeping them from getting hurt.

- **Make T-Ball a Fun Experience**

YMCA Youth Sports are based on the beliefs of participation and everyone plays. EVERYONE PLAYS-EVERYONE WINS. Promote good sportsmanship and enjoy yourself. If the kids see you enjoying yourself, chances are pretty good, they will too.

- **Don't Assume**

Not all children know where the bases are or where right field is. Most likely, they probably won't remember from practice to practice, so be prepared to show them again and again. Assume nothing.

- **Get Help**

Get as many parents as you possibly can to be involved in the practice and game process. When a person accepts a position of Team Helper or Assistant Coach, two things will happen.

- 1) You'll have more help.
- 2) They are less likely to be critical

- **Keep Activities Short**

Drills and activities should be short, no more than 5 or 10 minutes, and don't be afraid to repeat activities they enjoy. If your players want to play Freeze Tag or Red Light/Green Light every time they step on to the practice field, let them. You don't have to teach them a new game every week.

## **Stretching & Warm Up**

Stretching prevents injuries, improves athletic performance and encourages a healthy lifestyle. Remember to teach kids proper techniques before they attempt any new form of exercise. Children who participate in sports or other physically demanding activities should stretch to prevent injuries. Stretching helps young athletes prevent muscle tears and pulls. Stretching also helps a child's joints move through a full range of motion.

Generally warm ups should start with low intensity exercise such as fast walking to light jogging for 5 minutes to increase heart rate, raise the body's temperature and increase blood flow to the muscles. A proper warm up may reduce chance of injury to your body. If children learn correct exercise habits when they are young, they can continue to practice them when they get older. The fun factor is integral when teaching kids about stretching. If a child thinks stretching is boring, she will likely lose interest in doing it. Below are some examples of fun stretching and warm up exercises to implement before beginning your practice.

### **1. Have children mimic animals while they stretch.**

- **Bear Crawl**- encourage children to practice their bear crawl while walking on their hands and feet. Have them walk forwards, backwards, and sideways. The bear crawl stretches and strengthens the hamstrings, calves and back.
- **Elephant**- Have children hook their fingers together and swing their arms in front of them to mimic an elephant's trunk. This will stretch their shoulders.
- **Butterfly**- In a sitting position with the back straight, bend the knees and place soles of feet together. Pull feet towards groin and gently push knees towards the floor, mimicking butterfly wings.

- **Bunny**- Have children stand with feet together, knees slightly bent. Ask them to put their hands by their ears to create “bunny ears” and have them hop first on the right foot, then switch to left foot, and finally to both feet.

## 2. Follow the Leader

- For the first practice have the coach act as leader but for the following practices designate 1 or 2 leaders for stretching activities. The group leaders will each pick a couple stretches for the group to follow along with. Have them hold the stretch for 10 seconds every time, having the whole group counting to 10 with the leaders. Remember to keep this age appropriate. Young children may not yet understand the concept of stretching.

### a. Arms/Neck

- Roll arms around in a ‘windmill type’ action. First rotate right arm forward 10 times, then switch to left arm. Then try both arms at the same time. Then, change to rotating arms backwards using the same sequence.

### b. Quadriceps

- Stand straight, bend one leg, and hold your ankle or top of your foot. Pull your bent leg until your heel is close to you bottom. Use a teammate to balance. Hold for 10 seconds, and then switch legs.

### c. Hamstrings

- Have children reach up as high as they can while on their tip toes (reach the sky) for 10 seconds. Afterwards have them reach down to touch the grass, tell them to keep their feet together and legs straight. Have them count to 10 while holding this stretch as well.
- While sitting on the ground with legs stretched out in a V position have the leader designate everyone to reach for their left shoe. Hold for 10 seconds and then reach for the right shoe. Last, have them place their feet together and reach for both shoes at the same time.

**d. Triceps**

- Elbow Pull- Position the right elbow behind the head and begin grabbing the elbow with the left hand. Slowly pull the elbow until you begin to feel it stretch. Hold for 10 seconds and then switch arms.

Common Warm-Up Games

- Freeze Tag
- Color Tag
- Red light/green light

Warm-up games should be played for at least 5 minutes at the beginning of each practice to stimulate blood flow to the muscles.

## **Throwing**

Learning how to throw the ball correctly is the most basic of baseball skills. When kids develop incorrect throwing habits at a young age, it's hard to reverse the course and change their abilities for the better. Throwing is one of the most important skills in baseball. Stress to your players that accuracy is more important than speed. Teach them to throw over the top and not side arm.

- **Aim the ball before you throw it.**

If you want your throw to be accurate, you need to be sure of where you want it to go. If you are throwing to a partner, always aim for their chest. Feel free to use your glove to point at your target, as this will help your body to line up into position.

- **Windup**

Bring the throwing arm back and up, turn your front shoulder so it is pointing at the target. The glove hand points toward the target. The arm extends behind the body with wrist cocked and elbow bent (in an 'L' shape).

- **Delivery**

As you start your delivery you pick up the lead foot and stride toward the target. As the lead foot touches the ground, the hips rotate toward the target. Release the ball in front of the body and follow-through. Always look at the target throughout the throw.

- **Follow Through**

The follow-through ends with the throwing arm down in the front of the body and the feet almost parallel, in a balance ready position.

## **Throwing Drills**

### **Bonk the Bucket**

- Put an empty bucket upright on a tee.
- Line up players between 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> base across pitcher position.
- Players throw at bucket simultaneously. Kids like this game

*Recommendations:*

- Roll balls out to all players, have them find grip, wait for coach;
- On coach's words, players: TURN, POINT, STEP, and THROW at the bucket. Pace appropriately for your team.
- Big cheer if anyone hits the bucket.
- Help correct kids who need 1-1 help with mechanics, body position, and so on during this drill.

*This drill teaches:*

- Throwing accuracy (essential to baseball at any level)
- Throwing mechanics & 'muscle memory' of correct throws.
- Listening to coach & instructions

### One Knee Throwing

- Each player will need a ball to perform this drill
- Arrange players in pairs or singles, having all take a seated position by putting their left knee down (if they are right-handed) or right knee down (if they are left-handed)
- The other knee is up, foot flat on the ground
- Have players throw to their partner or individually to the coach.

*Recommendations:*

- Emphasize the upper body action of the throw
  - Raised arm and elbow, L-shape between the forearm and bicep, and then turning the body & following through towards target

*This drill teaches:*

- Upper body action of throwing
- Throwing strength & accuracy

### Bounce to the Bucket

- Set up a bucket or box at the first base. You can set up more than one station for this drill. Line the kids up about 10 feet away to start.
- First thrower steps up & tries to get the ball into the bucket- do so and they get 10 points.

- If they hit the side of the bucket they will get 5 points. The closets ball to the bucket will get 2 points.
- Remember to emphasize the proper throwing technique

*Recommendations:*

- You can increase the difficulty of the drill by increasing the distance that the players have to throw.
- Don't sacrifice the distance for the accuracy. Once the kids gain the accuracy, then in time they will build the strength to throw the ball a greater distance

*What the drill teaches:*

- How to get the ball to the intended target by aiming
- Throwing accuracy
- Proper throwing technique

## **Catching**

Proper fundamentals are absolutely vital in baseball, and there's no skill more fundamental to the game than catching. Learning to catch a baseball provides skills your kids will hopefully keep with them the rest of their lives. First, when teaching and providing feedback we keep our remarks focused on the *actions* of catching not the result. If we focus on the *result* we very rarely will have the opportunity to give the kids praise. When we focus on actions we can praise their efforts most every time.

### **Receiving (catching) a throw has three key *action* points:**

1. "Ready Position" (moving from a standing position to a Ready Position is an action)
2. "Move Your Feet to Catch"
3. "Reach Forward to Catch"

#### **Ready Position**

Instruct players to stand with their feet *wider* than shoulder width and with their hands (and elbows) held out in front of their body. Knees should be slightly bent and your weight should be on the balls of the feet. This stance is difficult for a child because of their lack of leg and shoulder strength, but they can do it. However, we will need to remind them over and over and over again. Saying, "Ready Position" is one of the primary things to encourage in beginner t-ball.

#### **Move Your Feet**

We want to remind our kids that the ball does not always come straight to them. Shuffling from side to side and going forwards and backwards is key in baseball. The ready position allows for players to be ready to move quickly.

#### **Reach Forward to Catch**

"You can't catch what you can't see." The point is that the most important part of catching the ball is *watching* the ball. Hold your glove and throwing hand out in front of you with palms facing outward. Finally, when the ball gets to you, squeeze the glove and use the bare hand to cover the ball and keep it from bouncing out of the glove. Use the term, "catch and cover" or

"chomp the baseball" as an alligator would do as referred to in the short story on the next page.

## **Catching Drills**

### Soft Fly Ball

Sometimes younger baseball players have a fear of catching the ball because they are afraid it is too hard.

- You will need softer balls (tennis balls, wiffle balls)
- Start by showing the players that the ball is soft, and even if it hits them, they are not going to get hurt.
- Then, have the players line up and the coach will throw the ball to them one by one.
- Once the players get the hang of it they can start throwing the ball to each other and catching it.

*This drill teaches:*

- Younger players will get over the fear of catching the ball by working with the soft ball and eventually moving up to the harder ball.

### Count the Catches

- You can do this as a group drill, or a drill with players paired up
- Have a coach at each station toss the ball underhand to the player in line and they must make the catch
- Everyone yells out, "one!" Then, another toss and "two!" And so on.
- Each side goes on until a player drops the ball, then they must start over.

*This drill teaches:*

- This drill reinforces the skill of the catching of the ball.

## **Fielding**

Another type of catching that players must become skilled at is fielding ground balls.

### **Ready Position**

All fielders should assume the ready position. In this stance, the player's feet should be slightly wider than shoulder-width apart, with the knees bent and the weight over the balls of the feet. From this ready position, the player can get a good jump on the ball and move quickly in the direction it is hit.

### **Moving to the Ball**

Shuffle to get into position in front of ball, hands drop to ground with both hands out in front (ball should be fielded out in front, not between legs), knees bent, bottom dropped down, and head up. For younger players remind them to squeeze their glove and use their bare hand to cover the ball.

You should know that young children struggle with a few basic fielding issues. One issue is that players routinely fail to get their glove low enough to the ground. Below is a script of a simple story to help young children best understand fielding.

1. Ask, **"What is green and lives in the swamp?"** Answer: Alligator. Ask the children to create an alligator's mouth (without a glove or ball). They can do this by extending one arm out with hand palm up and other arm out with palm down. Proceed to open and close your alligators' mouth clapping your hands together. **CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!** Next introduce this next piece:

**"This alligator is different than others. He does not live in the swamp where it is warm; instead he lives in the North Pole where there is snow. He lives there because he loves to eat snowballs. Today let's pretend our baseballs are snowballs and we use our alligators to eat the snowballs."**

2. Next, **point to your chin and ask kids, "What is this?"** If they don't know tell them and explain, **"Alligators have chins too. In order to eat snowballs they have to keep their chins low-to-the-snow."** Tell them if their chins are low-to-the-snow the alligator can't eat his snowballs. Also remind them to chomp on their snowballs with their bare hand.

3. This next step is crucial because it describes the transitional point (belly button) between fielding and throwing. Help kids understand **"Once the alligator eats the baseball, it goes down his throat and into his BELLY!"** Roll each of them a baseball. As you've done previously always repeat, **"Alligator low to the snow,"** after the ball's been fielded tell the player, **"Belly Button"**.

4. The last and final step is to say, **"Throw."**

## **Fielding Drills**

### Block the Ball

This is the first step to getting kids to learn the prospect of fielding the ball.

- Set up 2 or 3 lines of players so the kids can get maximum repetition.
- Have a coach or parent at each line with several balls
- Coaches need to instruct players on how to move to get in front of the ball
- Start the players off in the ready position
- Coaches should roll the ball directly at the players at first, but then to either side
- The player needs to shuffle to get their body in front of the ball to block it.

### *Recommendations*

- For each ball that the player blocks they get three points. If the player scoops the ball with their glove, they get five points.

### *This drill teaches:*

- Learning to move to get in front of the ball
- The concept of scooping the ball in the glove.

### Field and Bounce to the Bucket

This puts together the basic idea of fielding a grounder and then throwing the ball to a spot on the field. The emphasis is for the player to get in front of the ball and use proper throwing motion to hit the target.

- You can set up several stations in order to increase the amount of repetition
- You have a line of fielders and a box or bucket at a base
- The coach will roll a grounder to the player who will field the ball and throw it to try and hit the bucket

### *Recommendations*

- After a few repetitions of rolling the ball straight to the players try rolling them to each side to have the players shuffle their feet.
- Assign points for successfully hitting the bucket

### *This drill teaches:*

- Players to move their feet to field the ball
- Proper throwing technique
- Aiming at a target
- The concept of “scooping” up the ball with the glove

## **Fielding Fly Balls**

Teaching young children how to catch fly balls is a very tricky thing to do. Kids don't want a ball flying near their faces. Teaching them correct mechanics is not only safe, but will give them confidence. This takes lots and lots of time. Don't rush this process, but be supportive.

### **1. GLOVE TO THE SIDE OF THE HEAD, NOT IN FRONT**

You've got to be able to see the ball uninterrupted until it hits your glove. Make sure the glove stays to the side of the head to track the ball.

### **2. ARM BENT – NOT STRAIGHT.**

The glove hand arm needs to be bent when the ball gets to the glove if the player is under the ball. Catching the ball with an outstretched arm fosters bad habits and mechanics. With the glove closer to the eyes, less mistakes and misses will happen. You can't make fine adjustments with an outstretched or locked arm.

### **3. NON-GLOVE HAND UP NEAR THE GLOVE (NOT TOUCHING THE GLOVE)**

Two reasons for this – to keep the ball secure in the glove and erase mistakes, and a ball transfer is going to be quicker if the hand is already near the glove. This might also give a player another sense of protection,

which could help their confidence.

#### Helpful tips for teaching fielding fly balls to young children

1. Start by using a softer ball, such as a Nerf ball or whiffle ball.
2. Only stand 10 feet or less away at first when tossing pop flies.
3. Get their feet to the ball. A fun drill is to have the child wear a helmet, throw the whiffle ball in the air, and have them move to where they think the ball will drop. Let the whiffle ball hit their helmet. This enforces the idea of moving to the ball.
4. Do not get frustrated when a child refuses to get under a fly ball. This process takes time and in time they will grow confidence in catching fly balls.

## **Batting**

Hitting a baseball is probably the most difficult skill to master in baseball. Five separate hitting components should be taught to young players: grip, stance, stride, swing and finish.

### Grip

- Front hand goes below back hand in grip.
- Hands together, no space between them.
- Knuckles should be lined up

### Stance

- Feet comfortably wider than shoulders, set in a square stance
- Toes pointing towards the tee/plate
- Knees slightly bent with weight centered on back leg.
- Upper body bent slightly at the waist

### Stride

The stride is a triggering motion to begin the motion of the shoulders hips and, knees as the pitcher releases the ball.

- A small stride of the front foot toward the mound will be a good start to force some weight distributions and begin their swing sequence

### Swing

- Adjust the tee with the ball set even to the hitter's waist.
- Short stride with front foot. Back foot stays planted.
- Eyes on the ball, shoulders level, bat and head steady
- The swing should be level to slightly downward bring the bat through the center of the ball.
- Extend arms and follow through.
- Focus on making contact and not swing too hard.

### Finish

- "Squash the bug" with full 90-degree turn of back foot.
- Balanced position when the swing is over
- Do not watch the ball. Drop the bat and run hard to first base.

Children often learn better when there is a story behind what it is we are learning. One problem we see with young players is poor elbow positioning. Here is a creative story you can tell children to teach them how-to position their elbow properly.

Coach: **"What kinds of animals have wings?"** Answer: Chickens. **"How many wings does a chicken have?"** Answer: Two. **"What sound does a chicken make? Show me your chicken wings and let me hear your chicken."**

1. When we hit a baseball, we use a baseball bat and one chicken wing.
2. Demonstrate how to raise the rear elbow. Flap it and bawk your chicken sound. This makes learning fun for children, it helps them recognize where the chicken wing is supposed to be and sets the mental hook that helps them remember what you told them.
3. Give them a bat and tell them to raise their chicken wing. They do not need to flap their chicken wing just raise it high. **Focus just on the elbow. Keep instruction focused and simple.**

Coach: **"So what kind of wing do we need when we hit a baseball?"**  
Answer: Chicken wing!

## Batting Drills

### Tee Counter

This is a basic batting drill to help a player work on the contact they make with the ball. This drill can be set up in 2 groups. You will need tees, helmets, bats, and balls.

- One at a time, each player will take their position at the tee.  
**Remember proper batting stance.**
- The other group of players is waiting to field the ball.
- The coach says "hit", and the player swings.
- If the ball is hit the first time, the rest of the team yells '**ONE**'.
- For each hit, they say the corresponding number.
- The coach should give each player five swings on the tee.
- On the final swing (and hit), the player drops the bat and runs to 1<sup>st</sup> base

*What this drill teaches:*

- Helps players get used to making contact with the ball
- Uses encouragement of teammates

### A Drop in the Bucket

Sometimes young players have a tendency to throw the bat after they swing. This drill will show them how to drop the bat carefully.

- Station a bucket just behind the tee in order for the player to drop the bat once they make contact.
- Once contact is made, instruct the player to nicely drop the bat into the bucket before they run towards first base.

*What this drill teaches:*

- Repeated work with this drill will reinforce the importance of having to drop, not throw, the bat.
- The introduction of safety in baseball

## **Example Practice Plan**

5 Minutes

Welcome

- Introduce Coaches
- Have players introduce themselves
- Goals for the season

10 Minutes

Run and Stretch

- Run bases once
- Circle up and do stretching exercises
- Warm up game

WATER BREAK

10 Minutes

Basics of Throwing

- Throwing technique
- Drill: One Knee Throwing

10 Minutes

Basics of Catching

- Ready position, move feet, reach forward
- Catch with a partner

10 Minutes

Practice Game