

OAKVILLE LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL COACHING PRIMER

At Oakville Little League, the focus above everything else is for the players to have fun and develop a love for the game of baseball.

We strive to create an environment where:

- Players learn to appreciate and respect the rules of the game and how to be respectful both on the field and off. This includes how they interact with teammates, coaches, umpires, opposing players, parents and fans.
- Coaches are provided with tools to help them teach the game and continuously improve their skills as coaches and instructors of young baseball players.
- Players, coaches and parents all know what is expected of them during games and practices.
- Everybody on the field can enjoy a competitive environment while keeping the main focus on the kids having fun and improving their skills... having fun is far more important than winning but being competitive is part of the game so there needs to be a conscious balance to avoid putting competition above fostering the kids' love for the game.

Oakville Little League has established rules and guidelines in harmony with official Little League rules to ensure that the way practices and games are run provide the best possible experience for young ballplayers.

As coaches, your role as a volunteer is appreciated but comes with some responsibility... Any conduct in conflict with the rules of the game or standards of the league is prohibited.

There are also a few key aspects that need to be respected... This includes (but not limited to):

- Using profane language on the field – there is never a good time to use bad language in front of impressionable young ballplayers.
- Arguing with umpires – it is important to understand that umpires are only human and many are still learning the game... there will be mistakes and verbal abuse or confrontational behaviour will not be tolerated.
- Abusive or insulting comments to players – the kids are learning to play the game and will make A LOT of mistakes over the course of a season. Baseball is a game of mistakes and there will be many incidents of failure to deal with over the course of a season – as a coach, your job is to make the players feel supported, provide encouragement and help them learn from mistakes the right way.
- Getting involved with parent or fan conflicts... if there is a bad situation unfolding, your job is to protect your players above everything else.

Coaching Youth Baseball:

Baseball is a game that needs to be played loose and confidently. It is a game of quick reaction and full of uncertainty from pitch to pitch. Young ball players need to be provided with an environment where they can develop their skills, knowledge of the game and instincts without unnecessary pressure or fear of making mistakes.

As noted before, players will make A LOT of physical and mental mistakes over the course of a season... they need to feel free and confident to be aggressive in their approach and without fear of repercussion if they make mistakes along with way.

Below are some strategies for helping players to learn from their mistakes while remaining confident in their ability and willingness to play the game aggressively.

1. When a player makes an error or mistake on the field... react with positive reinforcement from the bench. When they come back into the dugout, read the emotional state of the player... sometimes an encouraging fist bump is all they need, other times they may be more emotional about the mistake.
2. When a player is emotional as a result of making an error or mistake... speak with them privately in the dugout or otherwise away from other players and just reassure them that it's OK to make mistakes in baseball... reward the effort or attempt to make the play, not necessarily the result.
3. Do not call out a player for making physical or mental mistakes on the field in front of the other players... have a private discussion with them if it is a coachable moment.
4. Most important thing to remember when a player makes a mistake on the field... they are almost always VERY AWARE that they made a mistake and it is not constructive to just point it out again for them... often, it is better to just provide encouragement (like, 'no problem, we'll get the next guy' or 'nice try, let's forget that one and be ready for the next play'). If it is a teachable situation, save it for practice.

Players feed off the energy and attitude of their coaches... be a coach that is fun to play for while still providing the leadership and direction youth ballplayers need to develop. Some ways to help make that happen:

1. Try to have a healthy mix of teaching baseball skills and having fun at practice... ideally, when skills are taught, they are followed with drills that are fun and reinforce the skill.
 - a. Basic throw and catch skills can be coupled with games like counting how many consecutive times teammates can successfully throw and catch the ball.
 - b. Basic fielding drills could be as simple as counting how many fly balls or ground balls are successfully fielded in some form of game involving the team.
 - c. More advanced players may have 'around the horn' races, where the coach times how long it takes players to make throws from home to third to second to first and back to home (thus, going 'around the horn').
2. Create an upbeat and positive environment for the players.

- a. It can be tough to be happy and energetic in front of the kids after rushing to make it to the ballpark after a long day of work, but the parents will appreciate the effort and the kids will have a better environment in which to learn and love the game.
 - b. If they think you are having fun, they will feel it is OK to have fun – which is the most important part of the game... it should be fun for the kids!
 - c. Encourage parents and players to make some noise during the game... always keeping it positive and directed at their own team. However, if someone on the other team makes a nice play, it is entirely OK for everyone to show their appreciation and cheer.
 - d. When having a post game discussion down the line, point out the positive things the team did and get them excited for the next game or practice... you can use practice time to address correcting mistakes from the previous game.
3. Sportsmanship starts with the coaches.
- a. As noted before, being argumentative and negative toward umpires or the other team provides a bad example for the players.
 - b. If there is a situation on the field that requires further explanation ask for time and have a civil conversation with the umpires to get some clarification... it may not change the call on the field but, if handled the right way, will at least create a positive rapport with the umpires – remember again that they are still learning the game. Whenever possible, wait until between innings to discuss so you don't slow down the progress of the game. This is specifically as it applies to rules, not judgement calls like whether a player is safe or out on a force or tag play or calling balls and strike – see below on those.
 - c. Judgement calls are not to be argued, especially balls and strikes. If there is a situation where, for example, an umpire is out of position and has to 'guess' as to the call, it is OK to ask if that umpire can ask for help from the other umpire on the field... but remember, it is at their discretion and not to be argued if they refuse to ask for assistance. Often, the best approach in such situations is to simply talk to the umpire between innings and let him explain the call – not so you can argue it, but more so you can both learn from the situation.

In short, the most important aspect of being an Oakville Little League coach is to make the game fun for the kids and provide them with an environment they can learn the right way to play the game... the desired outcomes from any season are to have a team full of kids that:

1. Leave the season excited about coming back to play next year... sometimes this means kids are going to cry when the season comes to an end – every kid processes the end of a season differently... as their coach of the last 5 months, be encouraging about how much they improved and how much fun you had as a team and, of course, how excited you are to have them back in the league next summer.
2. Leave the season as better ballplayers than when they started in the spring... this includes their skill level, their understanding of the game and also how they handle themselves on the field during games and practice. It is entirely OK as a coach to provide feedback on things they got better at and opportunities for things they can work on during the offseason... ideally, you can have this conversation with the player and parents – it provides the kids with some positive

feedback on how they spent the last 5 or so months and also lets the parents know that you care about the development of their child.

That all said, there are likely to be circumstances beyond your control as a coach to provide a perfect outcome for every kid you coach... some common constraints for coaches:

1. Some players will be limited in their attendance – make the most of the time you have with them... it is OK to manage expectations with parents in a situation where a player is consistently missing games and/or practices. It may also help to set a mutual understanding of what to expect for the summer if the conversation is had early in the season. Discuss with the league if you have a few kids that will not be consistent in their attendance to make sure you always have enough players available for your games.
2. Some players will be limited in terms of physical size, skill or athletic ability – it is not reasonable to expect that all players will progress at the same rate, regardless of their attendance and effort. Of course, be mindful that it's not the fault of anyone that some players develop slower than other... do your best to identify the most important areas that you can work on to improve them as ballplayers and, without making the player feel inadequate in any way, discuss the things you want to work on with them so they can improve over the course of the season.
3. Some players will simply be unmotivated to improve or simply not want to be there... this can be tricky as a coach because you do not want to 'call them out' about their effort or attitude in a negative way. However, it is a disservice to the parents and players to not be honest about basic expectations of effort and attitude based on the level that the players are at... there is undoubtedly a difference in expectations for players based on age and level within the league (i.e. NL vs. AL vs. Whitecaps level players).

Whenever there are questions about how to handle any of the above, please feel free to communicate with your league convenor to discuss strategies to provide the best possible outcome... the priority is always the kids and giving them the best experience possible for the time they spend with you as coach.

Oakville Little League has made resources available for coaches on the league website... please use them as a guide for how you teach the game and please feel free to provide feedback if you feel that something is missing or if there are any questions.