

Rookie Coach's Guide

Teaching Catching and Throwing

To work on speed and accuracy of throwing and catching, have the children form two circles that will race each other. The size of the circles will depend on the ages and skill levels of the players. The first player in each circle will toss the ball to the next, then immediately sit down. The second player turns and tosses the ball to the player on the other side and sits down. The object is to be the first circle sitting down. If a ball is thrown out of the circle, the player catching it must return to the circle before throwing it to the next player.

Set a big box, cooler or other container on one of the bases and have the children throw or bounce a ball into it from the outfield. We suggest turning the activity into a game by giving 10 points for getting the ball into the container, five points for hitting the container, and one point for the nearest bounce. This activity will help the players learn throwing accuracy.

Catch and Throw Drill

Catching and throwing are two of the most basic skills tee ball players need to learn. Before starting the catch and throw drill, teach them how to catch the ball above their waist with their fingers pointed up and below their waist with their fingers down. Have a group of players form a line and stand about 5 yards in front of the first player with a ball. Cycle through the line several times, tossing the ball underhanded either above or below the waist, and having the player catch the ball properly, take it out of his glove quickly, and throw it back to you. Provide encouragement and feedback to each player during the drill.

Teaching Fielding

Children may have a fear of balls hitting them, making it hard to learn fielding skills. When hitting balls to the players--or having them catch, coaches should begin with rubber balls or spongy balls to reduce this fear, gradually progressing to tennis balls and soft practice tee balls. Have the children lay their gloves aside and, using the soft balls, hit grounders or roll the ball to them so that they can pick up and throw back bare-handed. Then, hit balls to the left or right of players at infield locations. Insist on the fielding stance: crouched forward, glove open and down. The closest player to the ball should field it by moving with a step-slide, or crab-walking, three or four steps to the right or left, then throwing it back.

Chair Drill

The chair drill teaches tee ball players to field ground balls from the correct position. Have a group of players line-up next to a small chair. Tell one player at a time to sit on the chair with his feet wider than shoulder-width and flat on the ground. Teach him to lean forward while keeping his spine straight, place his glove on the ground in front of himself with his palm facing forward and slightly upward, and position his throwing hand directly above his glove, ready to take the ball out. Explain to the players that this is the proper ground ball fielding position, even without the chair. Roll several ground balls to each player while he sits in the chair and then remove it for several more repetitions.

Towel Drill

The towel drill allows tee ball players to practice throwing mechanics without worrying about where the ball goes. Use this drill before the catch and throw drill. Give each player a small towel and have him hold one end in his throwing hand. Teach the player to start facing forward, step forward with his arm-side foot, turn his body toward his arm-side, raise his arm to make a letter "T" shape, step forward with his glove-side foot, and pretend to throw the ball by snapping the towel in front of himself. Direct each player through 10 to 20 repetitions.

Teaching Base Running

Running the bases can be exciting for energetic children. Have two players both begin at home plate, suggests the T-Ball USA website. One player runs toward first base and the other takes off toward third. The race is on to see who makes it back to home plate first and steps on all the bases. To make sure players don't collide at second base, have the first-base runner step on the outside corner of the bag and the third-base runner step on the inside corner.

Teaching Batting

Coaches should always include batting sessions in t-ball practice. While other coaching activities are going on with other parent volunteers supervising, pull the children off the field one by one to work on their batting stance and swing. Later, give each child several chances to hit the ball off the tee without worrying about running to first base. This will give the children both batting and fielding practice. At the end of your practice, play a short game of at least two innings to allow the children to put it all together.

Equipment

Choosing the right bat is the first step for T-ball. Players usually require a short, lightweight bat. Test the size of the bat by having the player grip the handle with the dominant hand and hold it straight out from the body with the arm extended. Keep the arm straight and the bat level for as long as possible without letting it wobble or shake. Aim for holding it at least three seconds. Decrease the size and weight of the bat if the player can't hold the bat motionless.

Form

Proper swinging form will improve T-ball performance. Start with a proper stance in the batter's box. The feet should be shoulder-width apart and the knees bent slightly. Grip the bat loosely with the knuckles aligned and the elbows hanging freely at the sides. Keep your eyes on the ball throughout the swing and initiate the swinging motion by pivoting the back foot to generate power through the hips.

Throw the hands directly at the ball. Finish the swing with a follow-through and drop the bat before running to first base.

Box Hitting Drill

Tee ball players often have trouble standing the same way in the batter's box every time and keeping their balance when they swing. The box hitting drill teaches these skills. Mark a rectangular box on the ground near home plate, about 3 feet long by 1 foot wide. Have one player at a time practice 10 swings from inside the box. After each player takes his turn, have him hit 10 balls off a tee from inside the box. If he doesn't stay inside the box, teach him a different stance so his swings are consistent.