# AGSA Coaching Best Practices, Tips and Tricks

## Introduction

Coaches should strive to teach players the skills, strategy and rules of softball while making practices and games fair, friendly and fun. The best practices here are intended as guidance for coaches that go beyond the League rules.

They are ideas and suggestions learned by the League and coaches in the past that can help new coaches create a positive experience for their players and themselves.

## Safety for Players, Coaches and the League

1. **Monitoring pickups at the end of practice** -- It is best to confirm that each player leaves with their parent or caretaker at the end of practices. This sounds easy, but kids tend to wander off, parents sometimes wait in their cars parked at the curb, and tracking a dozen young girls is challenging. One approach for making this easier is to mandate that parents make sure the coach sees the parent (or caretaker) with the child before they leave the fields. Coaches can ask the parents to do this in the initial team meeting, emphasizing that it is for the safety of their children.
2. **Supervision during practices** – at all age divisions it is suggested that more than one adult be present during practices. If no other coaches can be present, perhaps a parent can stay for some part of the practice, even sitting in the stands, to ensure there are multiple adults with the girls.
3. **Girls going to the bathroom** – The bathrooms are located far from some of the fields, and the girl’s bathrooms are on the back of the building, hidden from the fields. Coaches and assistants should make sure an adult accompanies younger girls to the bathrooms so they are not without supervision behind the bathroom building. In addition, it is best for multiple girls to go in a group to the bathrooms (rather than alone), and to have a female (if not a coach then a mom who happens to be at practice) accompany them. If it is not possible to have a female accompany the girls, a minimum of two girls can be accompanied by a male coach.

## Making It Fun

1. **Most coaches award a player of the game** in the team meeting following each game. The award might just be verbal in older divisions, but in 6U and 8U girls will love to get an actual award. Awards used in the past include Tucker’s Tokens, a signed game ball (not the League’s) signed by the coaches or the whole team, a star with their name on it attached to the team banner, or certificate for “Team Name” of the Week award decorated with picture of team banner or similar. Get creative! By the end of the season every player should receive the award at least once.

Some teams acknowledge players with multiple awards for each game, such as handing out stickers for good plays, good hits, doubles, caught flies, and more. Again, you will have to award in a way that lets everyone on the team participate equally.

1. **Have 12U/14U and/or 10U players visit your 6U or 8U practice to demonstrate a skill or teach a new cheer.** This is fun for both teams and the younger girls love having the older girls around! Get to know the coaches on other fields during your practice times.
2. **End practices with a softball-oriented game.** Perhaps you have one of your own. If you do not, ask another coach what they like to do. One favorite is the team relay on the bases.
* Divide girls in two equal groups with one group starting 2B and the other starting at home
* At race start one runner from each group, holding a softball, runs all four bases back to their starting base where they hand the ball to the next girl in their group.
* The first group to have all its runners run and cross their starting base wins the relay race.
1. **Team Parties and end-of-season award** – plan to have at least one party to wrap up the end of the season. Some of the best feedback from players in the past has been for teams that have more get-togethers, such as a season-kickoff party, a LaVal’s pizza party in the middle of the season, etc. For example, one 10U team in the past had a team movie night at one of the parent’s house the Friday night before opening day.

Note, at the end-of-season party the coach should recognize each player’s contribution for the season. Usually this is a small award, card, signed ball or similar token, presented as the coach explains to the team and parents how that player made a difference for the team that season. There are lots of good ideas about how to do this. Ask other coaches, look online for ideas and be creative.

1. **Schedule scrimmage games with other coaches in your division** – scrimmaging will break up routine practices, and will give your girls confidence prior to going into the early games of the season. Scrimmaging is best done after you have had several practices and introduced the players to enough skills and rules for them to understand and succeed in the scrimmage. It is a great way to prepare girls for the first game of the season, to give them more game experience, and to break up any monotony of late-season practices. If you need help understanding other coach’s schedules to coordinate a scrimmage, contact the League scheduler or coach coordinator.
2. **Gamify some drills** – there are lots of ways to make a game out of drills during practice. Adding a game concept every once in a while (not all the time) makes practice more fun for the girls, and you will be surprised how focused even the least interested girls can get. Keep it fair for all players, make sure everyone has a chance to win at some point.

For example, try the Gatorade Challenge. Girls stand at the same fixed distance away and try to knock a bottle of Gatorade off a bucket. If anyone knocks it off by hitting the bottle the whole team gets a Gatorade (coach supplies the Gatorade). To make it harder, for girls in older divisions, you can have the girl field a ball and then try to knock the bottle off a bucket placed at 1B.

There are lot of ways to incorporate positive competition during practice. If practices are getting hum drum, try incorporating a skill-based game.

## Equipment and Uniforms

1. **Helmets** – Many parents will opt to buy a helmet for their daughter, especially in 8U and older divisions as fit and comfort become more important or if there are concerns about using a helmet others use. Usually it is possible to assign a team helmet for the entire season to each child who does not have their own. You can mark the helmet with masking tape stating the player’s name. In 6U there may not be enough team helmets to have one assigned to each player, but assigning to the same few players may work. If it becomes a problem for you or the parents, let the League know.

For catcher’s helmets, girls can choose to wear a baseball cap backward under the helmet or in 6U they can wear their batting helmet.

1. **Player Equipment**
	* LABEL ALL EQUIPMENT WITH NAMES – please, please reinforce to have parents label their player’s equipment and ensure that they have everything before they leave the field. Labeling also makes equipment easier to find during the scramble to get out on the infield and up to bat.
2. **Uniforms**
	* Visors – it’s inevitable the hunt for visors (and gloves hence note above) will take place before the girl’s head out on the field. Before handing out team jerseys/visors use a Sharpie and label under the brim the player’s first name. For darker visor colors, use a silver Sharpie.
	* See coach’s binder for optional ideas on jerseys and socks.

## Tips and Tricks to Get Through to Your Players

1. It has been said that **boys feel good when they play good, but girls play good when they feel good** ([http://amanda-scarborough.com/mental-toughness-vs-feeling-good-to-play-good/)](http://amanda-scarborough.com/mental-toughness-vs-feeling-good-to-play-good/%29). Encouragement and a positive approach to the whole team will work better for your players than pressure and increased competition. This sounds like a routine platitude, but in 10u/12u, and often times in 8u, you can immediately see shoulders sag, smiles disappear and performance drop when you, your assistants or parents call someone out for an error or raise voices at the team.
2. **Repetition matters** – though kids may seem to understand a concept through just a few attempts at practicing it, they will only incorporate it into their play if they practice it frequently. Aim to cover the most important concepts with several reps across all (or several) practices. Some successful coaches in the past have spent the first half-hour, or more, of practice running through the same fundamental drills – play catch in lines, infield grounders with play to 1B and base running. This has a surprising effect on players’ confidence and how they incorporate these fundamentals into their normal play.
3. **When introducing new concepts**, move from a brief discussion to practicing the concept quickly. Though players’ attention spans for listening may differ, almost none will retain the concept without physically doing it. In general, spend more time practicing the concept than discussing it. Doing this well requires breaking up skills into manageable chunks, and focusing on teaching skills in the right order. For ideas on this refer to some of the drills and practice plans available in the Coach’s section of the AGSA website.
4. If you are having a tough time **getting the girls attention** when you are talking, try the yo-yo-yo/yo-what’s-up trick. Explain to the girls that when you say “Yo yo yo!”, they should all respond back by saying “Yo what’s up?”. When they are talking and not paying attention when you are trying to explain something, calmly say “yo yo yo”. Sounds silly, but you may be surprised how well it works to capture their attention.