

Over the last 15 years or so, I've had the opportunity to observe a lot of parents taking time out of their day to bring their son to the cage for some extra swings. I've seen some good, some bad, plenty of ugly, and more than a few bats thrown in frustration. More often than not, the frustration arises just from well meaning parents trying to do more than they need to. So in the interest of trying to provide some ideas for parents to use this summer when Hawks season ends, and hopefully avoiding a few bat tosses in the process, here are some tips on how to have a productive hitting session with your son.

Intent is Everything!

By far our biggest priority for our youth players is encouraging them to swing the bat with the intent to do damage. Throughout the developmental process there are certain windows where youth/teenage players are best able to learn certain skills. Young players need to learn to swing fast! As a hitting coach, I'd MUCH rather have a player that knows how to move fast than a player that never learned that skill but has a "good swing." Hitting the ball hard is the single most important factor in being a good hitter and if the opportunity to learn that skill is missed in the early training stages, it is very difficult to recover.

For a player to have good intent, he needs to know what his goals are and to constantly be reminded of them:

Goal 1: Hit the ball as hard as you can

Goal 2: Hit the ball over the infield

If the player swings with intent it's a good rep, if he hits it hard it's a great rep, if it hits it hard and over the infield it's an awesome rep!

Failure is simply information!

When it comes to Youth practices, it's extremely important that we don't discourage failure when it happens in the proper context. Giving players freedom to experiment with different "movement solutions" is *extremely* important in terms of giving them the tools to make adjustments as they are older. As long as they player moves fast and swings hard, you will never hear me discourage a young player from swinging and missing. Just as a player taking a good rep reinforces what the player *should* do, doing something that doesn't achieve the goal provides insight into what *doesn't* work. Being able to differentiate what works and what doesn't is again a big tool for a player to have when it comes to long term development. Laugh off big swings and misses, encourage the aggressiveness, and move on to the next swing. If the player is failing more than 80-90% of the time you may want to adjust your practice plan, but other than that learning how to fail in this game is a big part of long term development!

Leave the Mechanics in the Garage!

If you are trying to fix your son's "swing" before puberty, I can promise you that it will be a losing battle. These kids literally have a new body every few months as they continue to grow, if you're overly concerned with how his feet are positioned or what his back foot is doing it's probably just going to change in a few months anyway. If you take one thing out of all this information, please know that TONS of players have good movements coached OUT of them by well meaning youth coaches. Less is more! For players 11 and under especially, I am not really providing specific solutions for them, but rather setting up a practice that allows them to find them on their own. Remember, no two swings are exactly the same, all we are trying to do is provide a big library of movement solutions for them to tap into that can be adjustable according to pitch speed, location, and type. This approach takes time and patience, but I can assure you this will be the best thing for your player long term.

Youth Development Checklist

Here is the checklist that the Developmental Staff has provided all our youth coaches with when it comes to running a quality practice. The good news is, working with your son can be really easy in that there are no real wrong answers at the youth level. No one swing is going to make or break them, no drill is going to singularly decide their future. If the way you structure a session checks all these boxes, chances are your son got better:

- Practice should be fun
- Practice should be challenging
- Practice should force athletes to find different solutions both mentally and physically
- Coaches should minimize verbal cues and focus more on external goals
- Practice should work on a continuum from Easy and Repeatable to more Difficult and Random throughout a session

I always like to finish a session with some type of competition or game-like simulation (bottom of the 9th down by 1...) and on days before games, you want your player feeling confident so finish with something they do well.

Sample Practice Plans

<i>Sample Plan #1</i>		<i>Sample Plan #2</i>		<i>Sample Plan #3</i>	
Self Toss	ST X8	2 Ball Soft Toss	ST X8	Rapid Fire ST	2 sets of 4
Walk into Front Toss	FT X8	Knob to Knee	FT X8	Bat Between Eyes WTL	FT X8
No Stride Front Toss (Firm)	FT X8	No Stride Front Toss (Soft)	FT X8	No Stride Inside (Pull the Ball)	FT X8
Height Ladder	FT X8	Depth Ladder	FT X8	3 Plate Front Toss	3 at ea. Plate
Angled Away	FT X8	Angled In	FT X8	Change Speed Front Toss	FT X8
Seated BP	BP X12	Seated BP	BP X12	Seated BP	BP X12
Seated BP Fastballs	BP X12	Seated BP Curveballs	BP X12	Seated BP Mix Speeds	BP X12

Other suggestions:

If practice begins to get stale or repetitive, here are a few things I like to do to mix it up:

- Hit water bottle caps with a wiffle ball bat. Extremely challenging but also fun.
- [Driveline Mini Plyos](#) are a great tool to challenge hitters and get instant feedback on quality contact.
- [The Farm Board](#) is a great tool to get players swinging from their middle, a top priority for youth players!

Good luck to everyone this summer! Keep it simple, challenging, and fun and your son will continue to improve!

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