

Learn to Play Practice Plans and Drills - U5/U7/U9

Introduction:

Whether you are a parent whose child is about to start Softball for the first time or you are about to take on the responsibility of coaching a team, this guide can provide valuable information to prepare you for the season.

The key to successful coaching is being prepared and organized. It is important to take advantage of the limited time you get each week with the players. We'll present a handful of fundamentals and drills so you will be able to outline the key drills you'll run during practice.

Having a list of drills designed to improve fundamentals and provide game-like situations will allow you to make the most of your time. The goal for the season should be to teach every player their positions and the game of softball. Oftentimes it can feel like "fun games" have taken up most of the practice, however, it is proven that these FUNdamental drills do in fact grow player development. If you are patient and consistently coach the players, your practices and games will become competitive and the experience for everyone will be enjoyable!

Coaching youth sports can be challenging. With some guidance and organization, your experience can be extremely rewarding.

These drills have been used successfully and were created so the coach can effectively communicate and the players can easily understand. Included are organized batting, throwing, catching and fielding drills along with suggested practice plans. The plans were created to keep the kids interested and provide a positive learning experience. Each page consists of drills and techniques to run your practice as well as a guided timeline to allow for proper movement.

Recommendations:

The drills are in order of difficulty. I recommend teaching a couple drills at a time. The most important thing is focus on the proper form of each drill and do not lose sight of the FUNdamentals of the game.

Coaching Tips:

1. Prepare for practice before you arrive at the field. Once you arrive at the practice location, your time will run by quickly!
 2. Be clear of the goals and expectations of the day and season. Coaches quite often will assume that every player understands what they are supposed to do, and how they're supposed to act. Be sure to state the plans for the day and expectations as practice starts. This is also important to address at the beginning of the season when addressing the coaches, players and parents. Have a set plan for your group. Every group will run differently, however being clear about expectations and how your practice time will run is very important in keeping everyone organized!
 3. Ask for help. MHMSA is here to answer your questions! You are not alone in this, contact your division director if you are unsure or need any clarifications.
 4. Keep the practice moving. Many coaches like to talk (too much). Depending upon the age group, kids typically have a short attention span and will lose interest. Be prepared to quickly explain the drill and then get it started. The more the kids are moving to various stations, the less likely you'll have to deal with other issues.
 5. Focus on the fundamentals. Always keep player development at the top of the priority list. If you work to develop every kid, by the end of the year your team will be better prepared than others. If each player leaves the season better than when they arrived, you have succeeded!
 6. Encourage effort. Practice is practice. The kids are going to make many mistakes, some more than others. We have a lot of "new to the sport" players this year (which is amazing!) we don't want to deter them from enjoying softball and having fun! The players will be trying new things and advancing in their development at different paces. The one thing they can all be good at is EFFORT. This will instill confidence in the players and provide them with a base for getting better.
 7. Don't worry about the small things. Kids will be kids. There should be certain guidelines for conduct, but kids being kids is going to happen. Set basic guidelines, and be sure to reinforce during practice. Gentle reminders at the start of each practice is encouraged (staying an appropriate distance from each others' bubble, hands to ourselves, kind language etc)
 8. Coaches are there for the kids, the kids aren't there for the coaches. If you missed your chance to play pro ball, coaching youth baseball is not the replacement.
 9. Coaches are role models. Remember to always talk positive about players, parents, other teams, and coaches. Kids look up to the coach, so it's important to provide them with a positive image. What we say, how we say it, and how we act can leave a lasting impression on a young player. Always be positive, even on those days that seem most challenging.
 10. Have Fun! Coaching kids should be enjoyable. Try to have fun, and keep the season in perspective. We are just happy to be able to be outside and moving!
- However you decide to run your practice, always ensure a water break every 15 minutes is incorporated.

Practice Plans #1 – (based on 60 minute practice).

5 Minutes -Have players set down their equipment and belongings at designated spaces

10 minutes – Warm Up – it is important to start each practice with a warm up. This provides the foundation for an organized practice and gets the players prepared to start the day. Have kids line up spaced an arms length apart.

- Spread out with enough room to do an exercise.
- Lite stretching exercises – touch touches, hip rotations, arm circles, lunges, etc.
- Calisthenics exercises – jumping jacks, high knees, butt kicks, shuffle, etc
- Lite jog around the field to conclude, zig zag run between pylons, relay races etc.

20 minutes – Station Drills (focused on the FUNdamentals)

Divide the team into two groups (groups of 3 or 4 with 1 coach) 10 minutes per drill with a quick water break in between moving to another station

CHOOSE 2 OR 4 stations depending on your practice plan for the day

- Station 1 - Hitting (see list of drills)
- Station 2 - Fielding - Infield/Outfield (see list of drills)
- The first couple practices should be focused on infield only.
- After a couple practices, introduce the outfield, and start to combine infield and outfield into practice (i.e. throwing to 2nd base, backing up 1st base, etc.)
- Station 3 – Throwing/Catching (see list of drills)

5 minutes -Water Break

20 minutes – Batting & Infield Practice OR 2 new stations (Suggested to designate one day of the week to 4 stations

and one day for 2 stations along with batting/infield)

- Team takes the field in various position
- 10 pitches (machine or parent) per player – run through first on the final ball.
- Rotate players in to bat. Recommendation - 3 players batting (remainder in the field).
- Although this is batting practice, the fielders should be taught the make the correct play

Practice Plans # 2

5 Minutes - Have players set down their equipment and belongings at designated spaces

10 minutes – Warm Up – it is important to start each practice with a warm up. This provides the foundation for an organized practice and gets the players prepared to start the day. Have kids line up spaced an arms length apart.

- Spread out with enough room to do an exercise.
- Lite stretching exercises – touch touches, hip rotations, arm circles, lunges, etc.
- Calisthenics exercises – jumping jacks, high knees, butt kicks, shuffle, etc
- Lite jog around the field to conclude, zig zag run between pylons, relay races etc.

30 minutes – Stations Drills - focused on the fundamentals. Choose 3

- Divide the groups into three stations - Rotate every 10 minutes.
- Station 1 - Hitting - see hitting drills
- Station 2 - Fielding (Infield/Outfield) – see fielding drills
- Start with the infield through a few practices and then teach the outfield.
- As you progress throughout the year then incorporate both into the session.
- Example - Throwing into the second base, backing up first base, etc)
- Station 3 – Throwing/Catching – see list of drills

15 minutes – Infield Practice/Outfield Practice

- Players take their positions
- Coaches hit balls to various positions
- Important to call out situations and options for the players. (plays at first, second, etc)

End - Water break/closing comments

Practice Plan #3

The Basics of Tee Ball & Machine Pitch

Learning the Positions:

- Walk each player to their position
- Start with 1st Base, 2nd Base, Short Stop, 3rd Base, Pitcher/Catcher
- Discuss important points of each position.
- Communicate name of each base and position
- Where the actual position stands in relation to the base
- Area to cover when the ball is hit.
- Boundaries to cover
- Over emphasis to only cover their area.
- Important factors to teach as the year progress
- What to do if ball is hit to their position. (Assume the play is throw to first base – other situations will come later)
- What to do if the ball is “not” hit to the player. What do they do? Where should they go?
- Importance of always paying attention to the batters and runners
- Return back to position after each play.
- Discuss backing up other positions when ball is in play
- Where to go when runners are running
- When to hold the ball

Discuss the basic concept of softball:

- Team on Defense – Team in the field
- Objective is to stop the batting team from scoring runs.
- Various ways to get outs
- Team on Offense – Team batting
- Objective is to hit the ball so the defense can't get
- Get to the bases before the defense gets you out
- Importance to running fast to the bases, and staying on the base
- Review basic rules (including local league rules) that are specific to your league

Fielding Technique and Practice Drills

Proper stance:

Feet shoulder width apart

Knees bent - weight should be forward on the balls of feet

Their head is up facing the ball.

Keep your eyes on the ball until the ball is in the glove.

Proper glove/hand position:

Glove hand should just be touching the dirt at a 45 degree angle.

Throwing hand should be above the glove with the palm facing the ball.

Once the ball reaches the glove the top hand should cover the ball inside the glove.

Infield Grounder Drills

Basic Grounder Drills

Form one line (spaced appropriately) just behind shortstop position

Have one player at a time step up into the SS position.

Roll grounders to the player and have them field the ball and throw back to you.

Side to Side Grounder Drills

Same as Basic but roll the balls left and right of the player to make him move to get in front of the ball. Emphasis the importance of moving to get in front of the ball instead of reaching out with the glove.

Daily Glove Work - This can be incorporated into every throwing warm up, have players partner up on their knees and get them to roll the ball down the middle, to their glove side, to their back hand. Repeat
x5 then transition to standing.

Plays at First - Grounder Drills

Form one line just behind 2nd base

Have one player at a time move into the 2nd base position, and have a coach/parent stand on 1st base. Roll the grounder to 2nd base. The player should field the ball and make a throw toward 1st base.

Plays at First - Side to Side Grounder Drills

Have one player at a time move into the 2nd base position

Have a coach/parent stand on 1st base.

Roll the balls left and right of the player to make him move to get in front of the ball. The player should field the ball and make a throw toward 1st base.

Emphasis the importance of moving to get in front of the ball instead of reaching out with the glove

Plays at Second - Grounder Drills

Form one line just behind shortstop position

Have one player at a time step up into the SS position.

Have another player in the 2nd base position.

Roll grounder to the player at SS and have them field ball and make throw to 2nd base. Make sure the player at 2nd base moves to the base to make a catch.

Hands Drills

Put the glove down and have the kids field the ball with their bare hands

Roll the ball then have them focus on using their hands to get the ball

Using a softer ball or tennis ball usual works great

Alligator Drill

Roll grounders to the kids and have them make an alligator out of the arms.

Bottom arm with glove is the jaw and the top arm without glove is the head.

When the ball rolls in have them act like the alligator is biting or eating the ball. Both arms come together.

Triangle Drill

With 2-4 players, have them form a quarter circle.

Each player should stand with their feet just outside shoulder width.

In the dirt draw a triangle using their feet as the base.

Have them put their hands together and extend out in front of them touching the dirt. This will create the triangle.

You roll a ball to each player and have them field the ball and toss back to you. Keeping the triangle intact (feet in place with hands in front)

Attempt to roll the ball quickly and request a quick return.

Continue around the group for about 5 minutes.

Finish with everybody fielding correctly and throwing correctly.

Speed this drill up as the players advance.

Throwing Technique and Practice Drill

Proper Throwing Motion

- Players start by facing the target.
- The foot of the glove hand should be closer to the target with the foot of the throwing hand back in the stance.
- Reach back with the throwing hand with elbow bent hand up and wrist straight. **Emphasize them “squeezing” the muscle behind shoulder blade (scapula)
- Glove hand should be in front of the body (and move forward around the body as the ball is thrown).
- Once in position to throw the ball the glove hand foot should take a step toward the target and the back foot should pivot.
- Release the ball at the point the arm reaches the extended point.

- ❑ After release the body should bend forward, with the throwing arm following through to the outside of the glove hand knee. The back foot should step forward as the throw is complete leaving players square to the target.
- ❑ It is very important that the player sees the target, gets into proper throwing position, makes the throw toward the target while still keeping eyes on target, then continues with follow through.

Proper Form Drill

- ❑ Without a ball – have the players get into throwing position and talk them through each step.
- ❑ Repeat with the ball. Do not be too concerned about where the ball goes. During this drill the form is most important

Throwing Drill #1 – Helmet Drill

- ❑ Use a basic grounder drill, but set up a t-ball T with a helmet on it. Once the player fields the ball, have them make a solid throw to hit the helmet.
- ❑ The helmet is used because it gives the player a small target at their level which helps with their accuracy.

*You can also stack 2 empty buckets on top of each other, or place a different object on the tee (soccer ball, softball etc)

Throwing Drill #2 – Kids Throwing to Coaches

- ❑ Get a bucket of ten balls and have the player stand with the bucket
- ❑ Start at 10 feet away and have the players throw all ten balls to the coach. The coach should reinforce the proper technique during this drill. The goal is get the player to throw a straight ball toward the coach.
- ❑ In order of importance. Technique, on target versus left or right, straight versus lobbed. Eyes on target is very important
- ❑ Extend the distance based on skill level

Throwing Drill #3 – Kids Throwing To Kids

- ❑ This is a great drill to do as the players improve. This provides them with experience both catching and throwing the ball from other players.
- ❑ Have the players start at distances which they can be successful. 10 feet away is a good starting point
- ❑ Tennis balls work well when starting

Throwing Drill #4 – Fielding Grounders and Throwing

- ❑ Line up a small group of players facing the coach – pick a distance that is suitable for the group
- ❑ One at a time have the players receive a grounder and stand up and make a proper throw.
- ❑ Roll 3 balls to the player before rotating
- ❑ The player should work on the proper technique while throwing.
- ❑ Extend the distance as the players improve
- ❑ Increase the pace of the drill as players improve

Batting Technique Basics

Proper Stance

- Feet - shoulder width apart,
- Square the feet to home plate – you can draw a line in the dirt to show the players where to stand
- Bend the knees slightly
- Grip the bat with the fingers, not tightly with the palm of hand. A relaxed grip is preferred
- Square the shoulders to the feet, chin should be closer to the front shoulder.
- Elbows should be slightly bent with the hands just outside the back armpit.

Proper Swing Motion

- Load and transfer - Begin the swing with a little to no step toward the pitcher. Do not pick the foot up high.

It's a very subtle lift and move forward while they move hands back with the bat (separation). You can tell kids to imagine they have a "rubber band" tied from front foot to knob of bat and they want to stretch this out, then drive with their backside (back knee and back elbow rides tight to their side)

- The stance should remain closed – do not step out towards third.

Throw hands toward the ball, bringing bat through the hitting zone to hit the ball Eyes should remain on the ball through impact.

- Proper stance and swing should be balanced.

Hitting From the "T"

- Tee should be belt high
- Kids should not hit up on the ball
- Hit through the ball – driving the ball toward the pitchers feet, top hand should be "palm up" to avoid rolling over the ball

Batting Technique Basics

Fence Drill

- Place T Ball stand 4' from the back stop
- Line up players so they would hit the ball into the back stop
- Place a ball onto a tee ball T
- Have the batter drive the ball into straight into the fence
- Focus on fundamentals of the swing
- Good stance, proper hand position, good swing through contact and correct finish
- You can use wiffle balls or tennis balls
- Set up 2 or 3 stations to allow multiple batters at once

Dot on the Ball

- Draw a DOT on the ball about the size of a quarter
- Place the ball on the T so that the DOT is pointing straight back but visible by player
- The player should be able to see the DOT on the ball
- When batting have the player focus on hitting the DOT while driving the ball forward
- This drill can be done either facing a fence or in the standard baseball field

Directional Hitting

- This drill is done in the baseball field
- Once the players have progressed and are making good swings direction is the next step
- Have the player line up to the plate (T) with proper stance
- Provide the batter with a direction to hit the ball – 3rd base, 1st base, etc
- Make sure they rotate their body around the plate and square their hips and shoulders to the direction they are hitting
- Have the player hit to each position once before rotating

The Cone Contest

- Game/Contest to help improve batting while having FUN!
- Place 4 cones at 4 different positions in the field
- First Cone – At just in front of the pitcher's mound – 1 Point
- Second Cone – At the front grass just before the dirt in the infield – 2 Points
- Third Cone – At the back of the infield dirt – 3 Points
- Fourth Cone - Ten yards past the Third Cone. - 4 Points
- Each player gets 4 hits and records their score based on the point system.
- The player with the highest total wins
- This can also be played in a team format - record points from each player – use team total to declare winner

Batting / Infield Practice

- Each player takes a position on the field – with remain players going to bat – need 4 batters
- One batter makes 4 hits – on the fourth hit the batter will run to first.
- Next batter comes up and completes his/her at bats and runs to first (player at first runs to second)

Continue with the batters until the first batter comes in to home

- Once complete the batter which just came home will rotate into the infield at pitcher. The pitcher will move to first base, first to second, second to short, short to third, third to LF, LF to C, C to RF and RF into the batting lineup.

- This drills gives all the players a chance to bat and play a different position

Catching Technique and Drills

Proper Catching Position

- Players start by facing the target.
- The foot of the glove hand should be closer to the target with the foot of the throwing hand back in the stance.
- The glove hand should be eye level and out in front of the body.
- Fingers up and palm facing the target
- Elbow should be bent slightly and arm should be in position to make a full circle in front of the body
- Other hand should also up and close the glove to close the glove once caught
- Earlier stages of Tee Ball the player will want to catch the ball with the palm up and fingers down this ok as they develop.
- The goal is to practice with the palm face the target
- Balls thrown to players above the belly should be caught with fingers up, below the belly fingers down.

Proper Form Drill

- Without a ball – have the players get into catching position and talk them through each step.
 - Show the players by making a full circle in front of your body with your catching hand Have the players copy you.
- Coach to Player Catch
- With younger players it is important to start slowly with catching. Confidence is key to the kids developing into good catching players
 - Have player stand in the proper stance about 10 feet from the coach
 - Line up 3 or 4 players per coach.
 - Coach throws ball at the glove and the player is asked to watch the ball into the glove
 - With a successful throw and catch – plenty of congratulations is needed. Encourage the players.
 - Important for coaches to throw accurately. Tennis balls can also be used.

Soft Toss Catch

- Players start by facing the target without a glove.
- Coach softly toss a ball to player which attempts to catch with bare hands
- The player should attempt to catch with two hands away from the body
- Fingers up and palm facing the target
- This drill is done at close distances
- After a few successful tosses and catches, conclude this drill with a grove on.
- Encourage player to catch as they did without the glove
- Drill can also be done with a tennis ball

Base Running

Base Running – Home to First

- Runners should learn to run as fast as they can when running from home to first.
- They can over run the base and should turn toward the fence when returning to first
- Players should learn to run through the base
- They should not slide – no matter what the circumstances are.
- Players should be taught to touch the bag every time.

Runner to First Base for a Single

- Line up the players at home plate
- With a bat (no ball) have the players take a swing and run to first
- Make sure they do not throw the bat
- They should place the bat down and run as fast as they can to first base
- Make sure they run through the base and return to first properly.

Runner to Second for a Double

- Line up the players at home plate
- With a bat (no ball) have the players take a swing and run to first
- Coach at first base will instruct player to turn and run to second
- Player should start to angle outside the runner lane so they can properly turn to second without slowing
- Make sure to step on base at first
- Players may slide or stop on second base.
- Make sure they do not run through the base.

First to Third Base

- Runners leaving first base should start to look at the third base coach at 2/3's the way to second.
- The coach will indicate to stop (hands up) or continue to third (large circles with arm).
- Players will need to learn to look for coach and react accordingly

First to Third Base Drill

- Line up the players at first base
- Coach at home plate with hit ball into field
- Runner should start toward second and begin to look at third base coach
- Coach will use either command and runner will react accordingly
- Continue to run players around to home using the same concept.
- Player will return to first base and get back in line to run again.
- Coaches will work to ensure players understand the signals and are executing accordingly