

Age-Specific Goals

From Coaching Youth Baseball the Ripken Way by Cal Ripken, Jr., Bill Ripken, Scott Lowe, Ripken Baseball

For the purposes of teaching baseball effectively, we have divided all players into the following age groups: 4 to 6, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, 13 to 14, and 15 and up. Some kids mature physically much faster than others. Motor skill development varies as well, but for the most part you can teach similar skills to the kids within these separate age breakdowns and have them experience success. If you look at the breakdowns, the 4-to-6 age group represents the beginners who usually play T-ball. At ages 7 to 9, fine motor skill development has progressed to the point that most kids possess the ability to learn to catch and hit a pitched ball. The 10-to-12 age group is when players begin to decide for themselves that they like baseball and might want to pursue it a little more seriously. We separated the 13-to-14 age group because these players are trying to make the adjustment to the 80- or 90-foot diamond while waiting for their bodies to mature physically. Once players turn 15 they are generally fairly serious and capable of executing most, if not all, of the skills and strategies necessary to play baseball at a high level.

We believe strongly in keeping things simple when teaching the game of baseball. With that in mind, we have developed five goal areas for each of these age groups. You'll want to keep these five goal areas in mind every time you plan a practice. They represent the fundamental building blocks for success. The goals at one level need to be accomplished before the goals at the next level can be pursued. If this happens, great! Consider yourself an expert coach. But, don't feel that you've failed if you don't get beyond the goals for a particular age group. If your team achieves these basic goals, you should consider your season a success. If you don't reach the goals, that's okay, too. Stress all of the positive things that were accomplished and try to figure out how to accomplish all of your goals the next season. Remember: Look to the future and learn from the past.

If you're coaching a team of 7-year-olds and it's obvious that they have not mastered the concepts and skills set forth in the age-appropriate goals for the 4-to-6 age group, it's imperative that you go back and work with the players until they have achieved those goals before moving on to more advanced skills. On the other hand, if your team achieves the age-specific goals quickly, it might be worthwhile to jump ahead and attempt to accomplish some of the goals outlined for the next age group.

Always keep in mind that just as some kids mature faster than others, some kids will master fundamental skills faster than others. Stay in tune with each child's needs and abilities so that you can tailor your work with each player during a particular drill to suit his or her situation. For example, if you're working on catching ground balls properly, some kids will be ready to field balls that are rolled or hit harder or to one side or the other before others. You can either group kids according to skill level, or if that's impossible, make sure that you adapt the drill to meet everyone's individual needs and abilities on a player-by-player basis.

Five goals for the 4-to-6 age group

Learning the basic rules—the right direction to run when the ball is hit; runners must touch the bases; how to record outs (catch the ball in the air, throw to first, or tag the runners); running past first base; scoring a run; three outs constitute an inning.

Throwing mechanics—turn the body so that the front shoulder points toward the target; keep the elbow above the shoulder; step toward the target with the nonthrowing foot and release the ball.

Tracking—follow the ball with the eyes into the glove, whether on the ground or in the air (use softer balls); use two hands to catch and field; try to catch the ball out in front of the body.

Hitting—how to hold and swing the bat; batting safety (when not to swing bats, wearing batting helmets); hitting off a tee; hitting softly tossed pitches.

Learning positional play—if the ball is hit to your buddy, let him or her field it (note to coach: try not to put more than 10 players on a field at a time).

Five goals for the 7-to-9 age group

Learning the basic rules—force outs; tagging up; baserunning (when you don't have to run; not running into or past team-mates on the basepaths); balls and strikes.

Throwing mechanics—introduce the four-seam grip; point the front shoulder, step, and throw; introduce the concept of generating momentum toward the target and following the throw.

Catching and fielding—thrown and hit balls; fingers up versus fingers down; see the glove and the ball; use two hands; forehands and backhands; introduce the underhand flip; first-base fundamentals; crossover and drop steps.

Hitting—choosing the right bat; proper grip; hitting pitched balls; introduce drill work (tee, soft toss, short toss).

Learning positional play—learn the positions and the areas each player should cover; cover the nearest base when the ball is not hit to you; basics of cutoffs and relays.

Five goals for the 10-to-12 age group

Learning the basic rules—infield fly rule; balks.

Baserunning—leads; steals; extra-base hits.

Pitching and throwing mechanics—wind-up versus stretch; four-seam grip; shuffle, throw, follow; pitcher covering first.

Hitting—repetitions; drill work (tee, soft toss, short toss, stick-ball, lob toss, one-arm drill); bunting.

Learning team fundamentals—cutoffs and relays; basic bunt defenses; basic first-and-third situations; underhand flip (box drill) and double plays; defending the steal; infield and outfield communication and priorities.

Five goals for the 13-to-14 age group

Throwing mechanics and pitching—emphasis on generating momentum toward the target and following the throw (larger field); breaking balls; change-ups; pitching mechanics and using the body effectively (longer distance); pickoff mechanics; flat-work (drills); introduction to long toss.

Hitting—introduce situational hitting (inside-out swing; hitting behind runners; hit and run; productive outs); sacrifice bunting versus bunting for a hit; understanding the count.

Baserunning—first-and-third situations; steal breaks; delayed steals; reading situations and reacting to them.

Fielding—generating momentum back toward the target on throws when necessary; crossover and drop steps; backhands and when to use them; double-play depth; pitcher covering first; infield communication.

Learning team fundamentals—pickoff plays; full bunt defenses; full first-and-third defenses; pop-up and fly ball priorities; double plays and underhand flips.

Five goals for the 15+ age group

Throwing mechanics and pitching—long toss; flatwork (drills); continue mastering breaking and off-speed pitches; throwing for accuracy; generating momentum toward the target and following the throw; pickoff mechanics.

Hitting—mental aspects (hitter's count versus pitcher's count); two-strike hitting; aggressive versus defensive swings; situational hitting; productive outs; advanced game situations and defenses.

Baserunning—one-way leads; going on the first move; reacting to batted balls; tag-up situations; third-base rules; no-out, one-out, and two-out rules.

Fielding—understanding and adapting to playing conditions (grass versus dirt, sun, bad fields); fence drill (outfield); crossover and drop steps; do-or-die plays at the plate; preventing runners from taking extra bases; communicating between pitches.

Learning team fundamentals—cutoffs and relays (introduce the trailer concept); advanced pickoff plays (daylight play; plays put on by fielders) and when to use them; double plays; advanced game situations and defenses.

In later chapters we'll show you drill and practice plans to help you achieve the goals appropriate for the age level you're coaching. It's our goal to provide you with a basic practice framework and many different options to help you keep practices fresh and effective. Remember that this book is primarily designed to provide you with a solid plan to become an effective coach. Other Ripken instructional products go into more detail about skill development, drills, and team fundamentals. Future products will delve even deeper into the concepts of team fundamentals and strategies. This book, combined with our other resources, should arm you with everything you need to experience success as a baseball coach.