

YOUTH HITTING MANUAL

Prepared for the:

MEMORIAL LITTLE LEAGUE SKILLS PROGRAM



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Memorial Skills Program

General Guidelines for Hitting Instruction

Generally speaking, it is counterproductive to teach multiple elements of hitting to a young hitter all at the same time. Plus, young kids don't have much fun hitting when they are worried about the technical details. Coach Servais once explained to the Memorial Skills Coaches that giving a young hitter too much coaching is one of the worst things we can do.

For these reasons, the Memorial Skills Program advocates a simple progressive approach to hitting instruction, especially among the younger age groups. The goal is to keep things simple for the hitters, to keep them swinging freely and naturally and to master one technical skill at a time. Advanced technical skills should not be forced upon younger hitters and should not be taught until the basics are mastered. Sometimes it is just better to say, "Just swing!"

These guidelines attempt to identify the types of Skills that our coaches should be emphasizing. Although we have included some loose age-based markers, experience level should play a larger role than age in determining which categories apply to a given hitter. Please view this list as a progression.

STAGE 1 (Beginner Level: Ages 6-8)

Critical Skills:

1. Stance and Quiet Balanced Feet: Young and inexperienced hitters often struggle keeping their feet set in the batter's box. Many inexperienced hitters tend to unknowingly "roam" the batter's box from pitch to pitch and/or move their feet while waiting for the pitch.

Teaching Point: Tell hitters you are going to knock them over from the front. Have them get in a position to keep you from doing that. That is the good athletic position – feet about shoulder width apart, weight balanced, knees slightly bent, leaning slightly forward. Hit, field and pitch from this position.

Teaching Point: Skills coaches should teach quiet feet to young hitters, emphasizing a balanced setup in an athletic position and focusing on teaching one small step towards the pitcher or just tapping the front toe as the pitcher releases the ball.

Drills: 2x6 tee work can help teach quiet feet. According to ability, have a hitter hit from a tee, soft toss or live while standing on a 2x6 piece of lumber.

2. Grip: "Knocking Knuckles" should be more or less aligned and hands should be together. Hitters should be taught proper grip and given the opportunity to get accustomed to swinging with the proper grip.

3. "Chopping Down the Tree": In tee ball and in coach pitch, it is often easier to hit the ball far with an upper-cut swing. Indeed, many young hitters have difficulty elevating the ball unless they drop their hands and swing with at least a slight upper-cut. Because of this, a high percentage of inexperienced hitters tend to drop their hands before swinging (or start with hands down near their waste).

Teaching Point: Skills coaches should emphasize "chopping down the tree", starting the swing with hands by the ear. This is a difficult transition for hitters to make and some kids will not want to make this transition because it does not produce immediate results. But this is a critical skill and kids will not be able to hit good pitching from other skilled players until they master this skill so it should be taught early.

Drills: High tee is an excellent way to teach this skill. Set up tee so the hitter is swinging at a ball at the top of their strike zone which is just below the armpits. Also, hitting the inside seam of a ball on a tee helps focus on the ball and teach proper inside-out swing path.

NOTE: Do not teach hitters to raise their back elbow. This is a fundamentally incorrect approach to hitting that makes the downward angle of chopping wood impossible to achieve. Allow the elbow to be in a basically relaxed position well below the shoulder.

NOTE: One of the reasons young hitters develop an upper-cut swing is because their dads pitch to them in the back yard and hitters often learn, through trial and error, that the best way to hit a pitch from a guy who is three times their size is to swing with an upper-cut. With that in mind, Skills Coaches should do their best to **simulate pitches from a low arm angle**. If a coach is releasing pitches in batting practice from 6-7 feet above ground level and the strike zone for the hitter is 1-3 feet above ground level, it is very difficult for a hitter to elevate the ball with a proper swing.

NOTE: Another common problem is hitters using **bats that are too big or too heavy**. Hitters always want to use the bigger bats and intuitively, hitters know that they can hit balls further with heavier bats. However, the Memorial Skills Program feels strongly that young hitters should error on the side of using smaller and lighter bats with a “drop” (length of bat minus weight in ounces) of minus 12-13 being best for younger ages. The goal of the Skills Program is to teach proper mechanics and heavy bats often make it difficult for young hitters to practice proper form.

WEIGHT	HEIGHT									
	3'-3 1/4"	3'5"-3'8"	3'9"-4'	4'1"-4'4"	4'5"-4'8"	4'9"-5'	5'1"-5'4"	5'5"-5'8"	5'9"-6'	6'1"-over
Under 60 Lbs	26"	27"	28"	29"	29"					
61 - 70	27"	27"	28"	29"	30"	30"				
71 - 80		28"	28"	29"	30"	30"	31"			
81 - 90		28"	29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	32"		
91 - 100		28"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"		
101 - 110		29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"		
111 - 120		29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"		
121 - 130		29"	30"	30"	30"	31"	32"	33"	33"	
131 - 140		29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	33"	33"	
141 - 150			30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	33"	33"	
151 - 160			30"	31"	31"	32"	32"	33"	33"	33"
161 - 170				31"	31"	32"	32"	33"	33"	34"
171 - 180						32"	33"	33"	34"	34"
over 180							33"	33"	34"	34"

MOST POPULAR LENGTH BY AGE						
AGE	5-7	8-9	10	11-12	13-14	15-16
LENGTH	24"-26"	26"-28"	28"-29"	30"-31"	31"-32"	32"-33"

4. Eye on Ball - Proper Head Position: It sounds simple but the number one reason young hitters struggle with contact is because they are not very good at keeping their head still and their eye on the ball. This is particularly tough for young hitters that swing hard as inexperienced hitters tend to pull their head off of the ball when they take a big swing.

Teaching Point: Are your eyes looking down at the point of impact as you swing? The goal is to get these hitters to where they can swing freely and swing hard without losing their head or eye position.

Drills: There are a number of different drills to work on this skill. Soft toss with wiffle golf balls can be useful. Hitting the inside seam of a ball on a tee helps focus on the ball and teach proper inside-out swing path. Placing a ball on the ground just in front of home plate and telling the hitter to find that ball after contact also helps.

NOTE: This can become a problem for hitters at higher age and experience levels as well - particularly for hitters that are really trying to hit the ball hard.

5. Stepping Towards the Pitcher: A high percentage of young hitters step away from home plate as the pitch arrives - sometime referred to as "stepping in the bucket". Often, this is symptomatic of "fear of the ball" issues and can be very difficult to fix.

Teaching Point: The Memorial Skills Program teaches a very short, quick stride towards the pitcher. The shorter the stride, the less this issue is a problem.

Drills: 2x6 tee work can be very effective in developing good habits in this regard. Locating a tee on the outer half of the plate, off of the hitter's back hip (approximately).

STAGE 2 (Advanced Beginner Level: Ages 7-10)

Critical Skills:

1. Pitch recognition/Selectivity: In Farm baseball, pitch selection is not a critical skill as strong hitters can go up hacking when they know their coach is going to try to throw a hittable strike.

Teaching Point: Many young hitters tend to "predetermine" whether or not they are going to swing the bat. It often takes years to work through these issues. Focus on teaching young hitters to "Yes" the ball. They should approach every pitch as if it's going to be right down the middle and learn to hold off late if the pitch is a ball.

Drills: "Swing or Take" front toss is a good drill to start introducing hitters to this concept.

NOTE: Some Major League baseball players never master this skill so understand that pitch recognition and selection is a long term process. The key teaching point is that young kids should be challenged to move away from predetermining whether they will swing as soon as possible.

2. Generating power at contact: Young hitters do not have strong arms or strong wrists. Many hitters swing with floppy wrists and/or tend to decelerate their bat at the point of contact. Hitters should be taught to accelerate or drive through the ball with "strong wrists and arms"

Drills: Tee work or front-toss work with training balls, soccer balls or volleyballs can be very effective.

NOTE: As hitters get a little bit more experienced, these same drills can help teach them how to generate power with their lower body and how to find their power point.

3. Maintaining swing balance: It is important that young hitters get in the habit of maintaining their balance throughout the swing. Hitters need to learn how to keep their balance even while they swing hard. Poor balance causes poor vision and an unnatural swing.

Teaching Point: If hitters are struggling to maintain balance, have them hold their follow-through.

Drills: 2x6 tee work and a rapid fire soft toss (3-5 balls in succession) is good for developing a balanced swing.

4. Short quick swing: Hitters at this experience level should start working on developing a short, quick swing path - directly to the ball.

Teaching Point: Hitters should be encouraged to "throw their hands at the ball" and should be discouraged from taking long looping swings.

Teaching Point: If a hitter is pulling every ball he hits and if much of his contact has "hook spin", then his swing is probably too long.

Drills: Inside Seam tee work, wall drill and rapid fire soft toss.

STAGE 3 (Intermediate: Ages 9-11)

Critical Skills:

1. **"Squishing the Bug"**: Hitters should be taught to "squish the bug" with their backside foot while swinging. This helps teach young hitters how to generate rotation and power with their lower body, keep the head still and stay back with their body.

Teaching point: When finished with the swing, a hitter's backside foot should be pointed roughly in the direction of the pitcher and a hitter's backside heel should be off the ground.

Drills: Tee work and front toss with soccer balls and volleyballs can help hitters find their "power point."

2. **Maintaining a Stiff Front Side**: Often, hitters fall into the habit of "collapsing" their front side leg on the swing. This means that the hitter bends his front-side knee during the swing instead of keeping his entire front leg stiff. Hitters that collapse their front side on the swing typically struggle to generate consistent power.

Teaching Point: If a hitter is consistently making contact with the ball well in front of home plate, he might be lunging forward at the ball and collapsing his front side.

STAGE 4 (Advanced Intermediate: Ages 10-12)

Critical Skills:

1. **Keeping Weight Back:** The Memorial Skills Program teaches a short quick stride or "toe tap" towards the pitcher. The stride should be used primarily as a timing mechanism. The hitter should not shift his weight to his front side with his stride. A hitter who shifts his weight forward with his stride loses much of his power, particularly against off-speed pitches.

Teaching Point: Hitters should be instructed to avoid a "heavy front foot" on their stride. Instead of "stepping" towards the ball, hitters should be encouraged to "toe tap" towards the ball.

Teaching Point: This is the point when a hitter is really learning to adjust to off-speed pitches. In general, teach hitters to always look for a fastball and adjust to an off speed pitch. Hitters will see far more fastballs and only need one good one!

Drills: Command tee work and soft toss work can help master this skill. Specifically, "Load", "Stride" (Pause for 2-3 seconds), "Hit". Off-speed soft toss where the tosser can fake a toss and quickly toss the ball forcing the hitter to keep his weight back until the ball is released. Two ball soft toss does the same thing when the tosser holds balls in both hands and only tosses one. He can also toss both at different heights and call top/bottom or locations and call inside/out.

2. **Plate Coverage:** Hitters should be challenged to learn to hit inside and outside pitches. Drill work can assist with this skill.

Teaching Point: Hitters should be taught to "open their hips" in order to hit inside pitches. Hitters must be quicker on an inside pitch and more patient (by only fractions of a second) on an outside pitch. The inside pitch is hit out in front of the plate while the outside pitch is hit back on the plate toward the hitter's back hip.

Drills: Tee work with the tee placed where a hitter will hit inside, middle and outside pitches. Soft toss can be done the same way. The ball should go in the appropriate direction at contact (left, right or center field).