

Philosophy

Five years ago, when my daughter was in Kindergarten and playing for the first time, I remember trying to teach her and her teammates about the strike zone. When they would swing at a pitch that was too high, too outside, or just not a strike, we'd tell them not to swing at those – to wait for a good pitch. From a 5 year-old's perspective a strike zone is an invisible thing that a crazy grownup is talking about – can't see or touch it, yet it supposedly exists. Talk about an abstract abstraction.

It wasn't until last year that I realized the possible effect that this was having on girls as they try to get used to hitting pitches from their coaches or their teammates. Rather than having aggressive hitters, many girls become afraid of doing the wrong thing (swinging at a bad pitch) and then they do nothing. Then we're confused as to why they let strike three sail by.

So she's thinking - "OK, so he's telling me not to swing if it's out of the strike zone, but then he's telling me I should have swung – what *is* a strike zone? When do we get popsicles?" Pretty heady stuff for a little girl.

That's a confused kid we've created. A wise philosopher once said, "This is not good." So I've changed my approach.

What if, instead, she is thinking something like – "If I can hit that ball, I'm all over it. If I miss it, I'll get another try later. No biggy. When do we get popsicles?"

Below are some guidelines that we now use to try and get the latter, and make the game more fun. The first section discusses the mental approach to hitting that we are trying to achieve. The second section focuses on hitting off the tee – success here leads to success against live pitches. Success off the tee is defined not by how far the ball travels, but whether the girl develops a swing that will transfer to success against live pitching.

The Mental Approach

- **Relax – it's batting practice** – In batting practice, you'll notice girls are relaxed, and swinging at (and hitting most of) just about anything that comes their way. Practice is obviously much less stressful than the game, but if we teach them to hit during the game like they hit in practice, they will succeed as often in the game as they do in practice.
- **Start your swing on every pitch** – she should believe she is going to swing – that is the default – and she should hold up only if, at the last moment, she realizes she won't be able to hit the ball. She loads up, the hips rotate, the hands start in motion. **If she doesn't start the process, she'll never catch up in time.** This is a habit that is most important to establish early on, because once she gets to a level where the pitches are coming in faster and faster, she'll have much more success if 'start your swing' has become natural for her.
- **Take the umpire out of the game** – the only way an aggressive hitter takes a walk is if she can't possibly hit four balls in the same at bat. Taking called strikes puts her at bat in the umpire's hands – she loses control and suddenly can't pull the trigger. Taking called strike one is OK, but taking called strike two is not allowed. If she takes two strikes, you can bet she'll take strike three, or take a weak swing. **Taking called strike two is not allowed.**
- **It's more fun to run than walk** – We're here to try and hit, otherwise we don't need a bat. Reward them for swinging, even if they strike out on a bad pitch. The only correction to aggression I would make is if she swings at a ball that bounces, is over her head, or is way outside. If she has a tendency to swing at pitches in the dirt, or over her head, make a note during the game, and then feed her an over-abundance of those pitches in practice so she can learn to recognize them as unhittable, and lay off.
- **The strike zone is her zone** – this point feeds off the previous two points – she needs to learn what she can hit, not what is a strike or a ball in an umpire's eyes. Once she learns that, she'll rarely take a strike, and she'll rarely swing at a ball out of the strike zone.

As adults who may have progressed through high school (or college) playing softball or baseball, or who watch it on TV, we may tend to attempt to inject the preciseness of an adult version of the game into a child's version. If we simplify the game, and slowly add complexity as they get older, they'll become confident hitters who want to take advantage of every chance they get to hit a line drive.

The Swing

Tee Basics:

This is where we begin to lay the building blocks of a sound swing. Hitting at the youth level should be about hitting the ball square off the tee. It doesn't matter how far she hits it as long as she does not hit the tee, pop the ball up, or swing over it. The goal is a line drive. Therefore, we need to emphasize some basic concepts that will develop a consistent swing and avoid some bad habits that become big problems later when hitting pitched balls. For example, over-swinging at a ball on the tee is common and causes many future headaches.

Tee placement:

(Note: The tee is essentially a home plate with a post coming up front the middle of it. When we refer to the tee, we are referring to the whole contraption. When we refer to 'home plate', we are talking about the permanent home plate that is in the ground.) When a hitter correctly hits a *pitched* ball, she should be making contact with the ball just as it reaches the front edge of home plate. To ingrain that concept in the batter's mind, she needs to contact the ball at the same point when hitting off the tee. Therefore, do not completely cover home plate with the tee. Rather, move the tee forward so that the tee's ball holder lines up (is above) the front edge of the plate. When she hits, make sure she is properly lined up with home plate (covered later), not the tee; that way she'll make contact 'out in front' of the plate as she is supposed to do. If we place the tee on home plate, and the ball holder is in the middle of the plate, the batter will not be able to extend through the ball, either with the tee, or a pitched ball. "Take it ***out in front***, Mary"

Now the Swing: Think of the swing in three phases: (1) Lock In – (2) Stride – (3) Swing When Ready.

Phase 1: “Lock In” (“Block Out”)

This phase is all about setting up properly so that the next two phases can be successful. It’s the foundation upon which the swing is built. There is also an aspect of *Locking In* that is mental as well, which is blocking out everything around her and focusing all of her energy on the ball on the tee in front of her. This is a tough concept for many 5 year olds – but it is one that they can start learning now.

Checklist for Hands as follows:

- Knuckles – ‘knocking knuckles’ are lined up in a straight line. Positioning the hands this way allows for better wrist flexibility during the swing. This is very important.
- Hands – are 3 to 4 inches in front of the chest (for now).
- Elbows – are down, and the forearms, in relation to each other, are in an upside-down ‘V’.
- Shoulders – no tension in shoulders.

Checklist for Stance as follows:

- Feet – pointed straight ahead and shoulder width apart, even with the middle ‘corner’ of home plate (not the tee). With respect to how far away from the plate the batter should be, she should be able to hold the bat in her left hand, extend her arm and lower the bat (with knees bent slightly) and it should touch the far edge of home plate. “Can you cover home?”
- Knees – bent slightly.
- Hips – level.
- Head and Eyes – level.
- Front shoulder – slightly down.
- Front shoulder/front hip – slightly inward.
- Weight – balanced on both feet, weight on balls of feet, not heels.

When you say “Lock In”, she lines up her feet, lower’s her bat to check plate coverage, picks it back up, and assumes the position described in the checklist above. “Block Out” - mentally she is now the picture of focus, waiting for your next words – “Load Up”

Phase 2: “Stride”

this phase gets her ready to swing – it puts her in a position to unload and produce a proper swing that goes through the ball. (key phrases for this phase – Ike and Mike, Top of the Tee, Squish the Bug – these are explained later, and are actually part of the swing phase, but need to be said prior to the swing as reminders)

Checklist for Stride as follows:

- Feet – short soft step toward pitcher – 3-4 inches. Front toe opens slightly but front hip stays closed. There should be no more lateral movement of her feet from this point forward. She has just ‘stepped in’ – when she swings, her left foot will remain in place. This is important later when fast pitches are coming in. A college coach told me the batter needs to step into the pitch ‘on time’, as in, before the pitcher even releases the ball. All of that foot movement should be done prior to the actual swing.
- Head – does not move and hips do not move forward.
- Weight is not on inside of back foot – still standing on balls of feet – not heels
- Hands – pull back – bottom hand is at the top of the strike zone, maintain the upside-down ‘V’ with elbows. Chin is now resting against Ike. Ike and Mike – Left shoulder is Ike, right one is Mike. When she gets her hands back in a ‘ready to swing’ position, her chin is touching Ike. As she rotates her hips and upper body through her swing, but keeps her head steady, she should finish with her chin touching Mike.
- Bat – straight back over her shoulder (not wrapped around her head) at a 45 degree angle to the ground.
- Eyes – focused on the ball (if a pitcher was throwing, she would now focus on the pitcher’s hip where the ball will be released).

That’s a lot, but now she’s ready!

Phase 3: “Swing When Ready”

When you say this, it is her signal that you feel she is ready. One more deep breath, and then she unloads. This is not a ready-set-go kind of thing. ‘Swing when ready’ puts her in control of when she triggers the actual swing.

Checklist for Swing as follows:

- Hips/Upper body/Head - As she swings, her hips and upper body rotate, as if on a swivel. They do not move forward or backward. Her head stays still with her eyes locked on the top of the tee. Hip swivel + head still = transition from Ike to Mike.
- Feet/Legs/Knees/Hips – this is where ‘Squish the Bug’ comes in. With her weight back, as her hips turn, her back foot will turn as well, and she’ll wind up spinning on her back toe as if squishing a bug. Keeping her weight back at the beginning of her swing will force her to squish the bug. If her weight all shifts to her front foot, she will lose the power in her swing as she can no longer drive off her back leg. The front foot really doesn’t move very much – it turns slightly because her hips are turning. Remember, the front foot should not be moving forward as the pitch comes in. She already stepped-in when she loaded up. If her front foot moves now, her hips and shoulders will go to. All of that movement at once makes it very difficult to execute a proper swing and hit the ball squarely. The front leg should lock out – the role of the front leg is to push against the ground as her hips rotate – creating torque and enabling a more powerful hip and upper body rotation. The key to generating power is how fast the hips rotate. After the big is squished, the back leg should be bent almost 90 degrees at the knee.
- Arms/Elbows/Wrists – As she rotates her hips into her swing, the bat is now coming around as well. The right elbow tucks into her side, and the knob of the bat comes down toward the ball first, then the barrel comes around through the hitting zone. Some girls will ‘gear up’ for the swing and the back shoulder will drop as the bat starts on its path. The result of this is usually a bat that comes through the zone on an uppercut, which makes hitting the pitch multiples harder. In addition, her arms remain close to her body. She should be close enough to the plate to reach the outside edge of the strike zone without fully extending her arms. Full extension will rob her of the power generated by a quick, compact swing. Full extension of the arms does not occur until after contact, when reaches out toward the pitcher – the wrists must not roll over until full extension after contact, or else she’ll hit weak grounders.
- “Top of the tee” – constantly remind the girls that after they swing they should be looking at the empty top of the tee, not where the ball went. Easier said than done, but

it will keep her eyes locked on her target all the way through her swing. Once they associate 'top of the tee' with keeping their head locked in position through the entire swing, you can even shout it out if she is swinging at a pitched ball – it's a good reminder to keep her head in there.

- Stacking – at the completion of the swing, her head should be centered vertically over her right thigh, not lunged forward. We see a lot of young girls who are either trying to kill the ball or who are using a bat that is much too heavy – they swing so hard they lose their balance and their whole body corkscrews. When hitting off of a tee, some amount of success is bound to occur in spite of a crazy swing (even a blind squirrel finds an acorn once in a while), so the bad habit can become worse. The problem – once actual pitches start coming she has a much smaller chance of success if she is losing her balance at the plate. If she can't end her swing with her eyes looking at the top of the tee and her chin on Mike, she is headed down the wrong path.
- Contact – both hands should remain on the bat all the way through the swing – the bat should finish high over the left shoulder - then she can lay the bat on the ground and run.

Conclusion

All of this is meant to help the girls learn muscle memory at an early age so that a consistent swing is used, generating more consistent contact and confidence. Teaching the girls to go for it – the mental approach – is also a key to making this game fun (and not scary).

When the pitches start coming in, try to teach the girls to swing if they feel they can hit it. They have no clear concept of a strike zone at an early age so it is not helpful feedback to shout balls and strikes at them – they'll think too much and be timid swingers. They'll learn the strike zone as they develop.

Practicing Hitting:

Practices (April) – exclusive tee work – two rotations of 20 swings each – build muscle memory and concepts in their minds.

May-June – ½ tee work and ½ pitched balls – two rotations of 20 swings each – even the girls who start to hit the ball well off of pitches continue tee work

FIELDING

Basics and Breaking Bad Habits

Coming up (ball goes under) on a grounder – player should pancake her glove to the ground and come up as the ball comes up. Stress that the ball should never go under her glove. It's easier to come up with the ball than go down after it – so start low and come up.

Fielding with one hand – that bare hand is a key to keeping the ball from dropping out – the problem is often timing – the player is afraid of the ball hitting her bare hand if she gets it there too soon. On grounders, the bare hand is above the glove, snapping down as soon as the ball hits the glove. On throws, it's there to squeeze the glove closed. Teach them to catch with two hands by tossing a tennis ball back and forth without gloves on. Later, there is a drill where they can play catch using the back of the glove – the only way to catch when doing this is to trap the ball against the back of the glove as it hits – that teaches the timing of the bare hand coming to help out.

Hurrying – many girls are so concerned about the action around them that they forget the first step – catching the ball. Catch first, everything else second. They can learn to save time by getting into throwing position more quickly – but there is no throw if the ball is not in the glove.

Fielding the ball to the side – concentrate on moving those feet – move as quickly as possible to try and center the ball and be in good fielding position when it gets there. Only field the ball to the side as a last resort.

Catching high throws or grounders with the glove pointed down. This comes with time, but I've found a good way to help a player gain confidence is to stand a short distance away (<10 feet), and toss the ball low and gradually work up. Later, vary it so she does not know where it's going. Correct her in a fun way each time she goes after the ball incorrectly, and encourage her when she does it right. Make her learn backhands and forehands – the work on balls where

she needs to reach over her head. When she has mastered the <10 foot range, move back and do it again.

Fielding shorthops – this is a tough one that seems to come with maturity – the bigger and stronger you are, the less you fear getting hit by a shorthop. The reason girls don't catch shorthops is usually because they turn their heads or entire body and hope for the best. Staying in a good fielding position and watching the ball is the key. Learning that the ball is coming in at a low angle and will skip off the dirt at a low angle is also key. There is a certain tenacity that comes with being determined to learn how to catch a shorthop, and learning how often means taking a couple in the shins, so have her wear catcher's shin guards until she realizes she doesn't need them.

Not charging after the ball – some girls can't seem to get to enough balls, some wait until it gets there. Teaching girls to come in to get a ball is something that should be taught at an early age – run in, get into fielding position, catch and throw. Practice by hitting grounders to them, and mixing in a slow roller – they should jump when they see it – but they need repetition to recognize it.

Not moving – every play, every player should be on the move. This takes time to teach because learning proper responsibilities on the field takes repetition. Some fundamentals – if I can get to a batted ball, I'm after it. If not, is there a base I can cover or a throw I can backup. For instance – a right fielder – if there is a grounder on the infield – she is moving toward the first base line to back up an errant throw. The center fielder is moving as well, in case there is a throw to second base – she moves to right center if the throw is from 3rd or SS, and to left center if the throw is coming from 2nd or 1st.