

Placing Players in Positions to Succeed

As players enter the 10-to-12 age group, they are probably beginning to gravitate toward the positions at which they have the most success. Being successful is fun for kids, so it's natural that they want to play those positions most often. As kids get older, the games start to become a little more serious, and at some point coaches begin to base their decisions about positions and playing time more on merit. Always keep in mind that kids mature at different rates emotionally, mentally and physically. Yes, more of your decisions might be based on skill level, but you want to allow your players to try any position that interests them.

Your top objective remains to develop well-rounded baseball players. Discouraging a kid who wants to try shortstop might squash his or her enthusiasm for the game and drive him or her away from the sport. Exposing players to more positions helps them develop a better overall understanding of the game and makes them more valuable to their teams as they grow older. Allowing kids to try a position in a game can be confusing and demoralizing. The worst thing you can do is to get someone's hopes up and then fail to give him or her an opportunity. Kids in this age group are still developing their knowledge base and skill level, so if you're going to have them work on the skills needed to play every position, as we recommend, it only makes sense to give them opportunities to try what they've learned in a game setting.

At this level of play you're going to be able to determine, for the most part, who your best players are at each position. These are usually the players who are the most comfortable and relaxed in game situations. Other players need repetitions in practice to develop the same comfort level, so it's imperative to ensure that your kids get equal repetitions at the positions that interest them. Usually your best players can both pitch and play other positions, so focus on developing players who can fill in capably when one of your infielders is on the mound. You don't want to place an unprepared player into a game

situation, because the inevitable result is failure. With small rosters, injuries, vacations and so on, you never know what lineup combination you might have to use. So be sure to prepare your players to take on as many roles as possible. Otherwise, you're placing them in no-win situations in which failure is the most likely outcome. As we've said, repeated failures can turn a player off to baseball altogether.

If you have players whom you envision as potential pitchers, your first step should be to make sure these players are interested in pitching. Pitcher is the most pressure-filled position on the baseball field, so putting a player out on the mound who doesn't want to be there can be disastrous. It also isn't fair to throw a kid into the fire if he or she hasn't practiced his or her pitching enough to gain some confidence on the mound. Find out at your first practice who's interested in pitching, and work with those kids throughout the season, whether you see them as potential pitchers or not. Some kids who you think are natural pitchers because they have strong arms won't have the emotional makeup or desire to pitch. Others with less physical ability will turn into bulldogs who get batters out by throwing strikes. Some players might take two or three years (or longer) to develop into pitchers, but they have a better chance for success if you begin working with them at an early age.

You never know what's going to happen during your season, so having as many players as you can prepared to assume a variety of roles is important to your team's success and the players' overall development and enjoyment of the game. Make sure that your players spend time working on all of the game's fundamentals during practices. Doing so substantially improves the chances that you're putting your players in positions in which they can succeed. The more success your players experience, the more they'll enjoy the sport, and that should keep them coming back for more.