

## Learning to catch a baseball

Learning to catch a baseball (or softball) should be easy, right? Well for a 4-6 year old just starting off in baseball having an object thrown at you that can potentially hit and hurt, your first instinct may be to get out of the way or to use the glove or bare hand to block it. For someone that young or older that has never caught a baseball before I think there is an easy, fun and painless way to learn proper technique and develop ability quickly.

Learning to catch a baseball effectively is important at that age not just for making the play but to reduce injury thus turning the player off of the sport that can be so much fun at that age as well as later in life. Almost everyone has seen the child that got hit with a ball and it is not something anyone wants to see. The next time a ball is hit to that child, their natural reaction is to get out of the way. Building trust in self-ability and in the glove is an important obstacle to overcome so they can focus on what to do once they have the ball making them a better player early.

These simple steps can teach almost anyone to catch as I have used them in teaching my son and other players when first starting off. Now I understand and believe not one thing works for everyone so some modification or extra time per drill may be necessary to achieve the desired effect.

Remember!

With the fun will also come the education.

You will need: 10-20 plastic golf balls.

5-10 tennis balls

*Optional* 5-10 soft-toss baseballs. (Heavier than tennis balls)

*optional* 5-10 baseballs

A proper fitting LEATHER baseball glove.

### Catching hand and arm position

Now you may need to first determine which his /her catching hand is if you do not already know. Usually it will be the opposite hand that that they write with but not always. You can ask them to first throw you a ball and whatever hand they throw with will be the throwing hand so you know they will be catching with the other hand. Or if you hold your hand up and ask them to punch your hand that will be the throwing hand. There are numerous ways to determine this so you may need to try different things. Once you know the hand used for catching, have them stand 8-10 feet away. No glove is needed yet. Ask them to hold their hand in front of them with the palm facing you. Their hand should be about ½ an arm length away from their upper body. Don't allow them to hold their hand too close or to overextend. The forearm (from the elbow to the hand) should be at about a 45 degree angle with hand higher than the elbow. Be sure to monitor arm extension and angle once you begin tossing balls.

### Stance

Even know this is a catching drill, being in the "Ready position" is important to teach because later on when they take the field a good coach will be sure the players are in their ready position. The stance when waiting for a ball to be hit you will be a somewhat different stance than when you are actually catching so for the time being, we will work on the catching stance as if you were simply playing catch. The feet should be about shoulder length apart but relaxed and comfortable. Feet should be square to you or if anything the catching foot slightly closer to you than the other. Knees need to be relaxed and unlocked. You don't want to see straight locked knees during this or when actually catching.

### The 1<sup>st</sup> drill

With the player in the proper stance starting with the practice golf balls, toss them easily at them and ask them to block them with their palm. At this time we don't want to worry about squeezing and catching the ball. All we are working on is developing hand-eye coordination. When they are making contact with the ball, I found it helps to have them push their hand 2-4 inches toward the ball but not to reach out with full extension to block it. Right before the ball comes in contact with their hand, they simply push the catching hand out 2-4 inches to push the ball away. Monitor this because a lot of players will start over extending. 2-4 inches is all. Also try to incorporate a theme into it. Like Harry Potter blocking magic or a Jedi using the force. Remember. Keep it fun and you keep their interest.

## Time to catch

Don't rush this step but once you are sure that the player has confidence they can make consistent contact when balls are tossed a little high, low, left and right and they are maintaining proper stance and arm positioning; now you are going to ask them to start catching as they are tossed to them. When they catch the ball, have them squeeze and hold the ball for 1-2 seconds. This will help to remove the memory of swatting the ball and reprogram them for catching. Encourage them to squeeze the balls tightly when catching. A relaxed squeeze in a game means the ball getting dropped or hitting the webbing and pushing the glove aside allowing the ball to hit the player. Also because we are only playing catch, be sure to have the free hand behind the hand catching. When the player actually does start using a glove, you will want to see them using that hand to help squeeze the glove to secure the ball.

- *When they can consistently catch and hold the thrown golf balls, for an added extra skill for a good 1<sup>st</sup> baseman, have them stride toward you with their glove side foot. A young player who learns to catch balls thrown at them consistently will have a good chance of playing 1<sup>st</sup> base.*
- *If the player is old enough and working on being a catcher, catching the ball between the thumb and middle finger is a good practice that some coaches and even catcher clinics will teach while in the catcher stance*

Repeat the 1<sup>st</sup> **drill** and **time to catch** drill using the tennis balls. When the player feels comfortable then for the 3<sup>rd</sup> set of balls (soft toss balls) he/she may start to use the glove. Be sure that when you buy a glove, it fits properly. Do not go spending a lot on a new glove for a young player unless you have plans to pass on the glove in a year. About every 2-3 shoe sizes they go up, you will be buying a new glove about. Stay away from the plastic gloves found in the toy sections. The so-called threads that hold the fingers together will not last. An inexpensive leather glove that when closed will secure a baseball is what you are looking for.

Do Not move to hard baseballs until you are positive the player is VERY comfortable and confident with catching. I think a good way to judge if someone is ready to try hard balls at a young age is their ability to talk to you while catching the soft toss balls. If they are that relaxed that they can answer questions while catching a ball, you know they are doing well.

I hope these tips help.

Ed Miller