



■ by Steve Milano

Is your child a natural athlete, or does he or she feel uncomfortable with sports? Do you know adults who won't jump into a company softball game or family volleyball game because they feel like klutzes?

Despite the popular belief that children are either born coordinated or uncoordinated (nothing could be further from the truth), your child can develop the basic coordination necessary for a lifetime of fun playing sports.

Children develop the eight basic sports skills – walking and running; jumping and landing; throwing and catching; striking and kicking – naturally and with your guidance, and use them throughout their lives to play all sports. Yes, whether or not you consider yourself to be a star pitcher, bench warmer or mere spectator, you can help your child develop these skills just by playing – not coaching – with your son or daughter correctly.

“One of the main concepts that parents have to keep in mind when playing with their children is that children learn by doing, rather than by following specific directions,” says Dr. Jeff Chandler, an exercise physiologist and professor of physiology at Marshall University.

“Parents really need to know how to provide the optimum learning environment for their child, so their son or daughter can learn the variety of movement skills they'll need to be successful in athletics for a lifetime.”

Experts like Chandler believe every parent is equipped to teach their child basic sports skills. By understanding how children learn and by playing simple games, they can develop coordination and a foundation for recreational fun.

## Kids Learn by Doing

According to physical educators, children learn motor skills through a discovery process. They learn by doing, not by instruction. Overloading young children with technical advice on footwork, arm movements or other step-by-step teaching will only frustrate both you and your child.

Giving your child goals and allowing him to solve problems will turn your activities into games, and your child will not even know he's learning. If you're helping your child learn how to throw, set up targets that require him to throw left and right and deep and short. As he struggles with one particular goal, ask him what he might do to make the target. Offer suggestions, such as turning sideways or throwing the ball higher, and allow your child to make adjustments.

“Remember, in the beginning your child will begin to make movement adjustments naturally, and will often figure out the correct movements by trial and error, without instruction,” says Chandler. “You may confuse her by giving her help she doesn't need.”

# No Kid is a Klutz

## Teaching your child sport skills



“It’s difficult to give an exact rule about feedback,” continues Chandler. “Don’t leave your child on his own, but resist the temptation to comment after every swing or kick – it sounds like nit-picking and criticism after a while. Generally, commenting after every four or five attempts is the most you’ll want to comment.”

“It’s also very important to use positive feedback instead of negative feedback. Instead of telling your child what she is doing incorrectly, show her how to do it correctly.”

## Learning Through Little League

If you’ve ever watched eight different tots run to first base in a Little League game, you’ve probably seen eight different ways of running! Children who have not yet learned to time their arms and legs and to slow down at the finish line will often waddle, stumble and trip when trying to run.

Parents have often started their children in organized sports at very young ages, hoping that participation in the sports league will help the child develop coordination. Organized sports do have their benefits, but parents don’t have to rely on Little League to teach their children the basics. In fact it can be frustrating for children who are trying to master hitting a ball or shooting a basket if they are still learning to run and catch.

According to Chandler, the key years for acquiring these basic skills are between the ages of 4 and 8. If your child has already joined a team, you can still improve their skills by playing simple games with him

between league practices and games. These games do not have to be the same sport-specific drills he does in practice, and practicing baseball during baseball season may even become boring for your child.

The eight basic sport skills transfer to all sports, and cross-training is an excellent way to help your child develop coordination.

## Your Child and P.E. Class



Parents are not completely on their own in ensuring that their children learn basic sport skills; your child’s school includes physical education. In Fulton County children take P.E. twice each week during elementary school years and daily during middle school years, with intramural sports available after school.

“Our curriculum in Fulton County schools is primarily set up to provide basic motor skills and motor learning, not primarily to prepare kids to compete in sports, but to enjoy lifelong activity,” says Therese McGuire, coordinator of health and physical education for the Fulton County school system.

At the elementary school level, children participate in non-competitive games and activities. During the middle school years, children receive more instruction in sport-



specific activities, learning the rules of various sports, participating in actual games, and experiencing a wide variety of activities so that children can experience “a little bit of everything,” says McGuire.

“Hopefully, if we do our job well, kids will leave with those motor skills wanting to pursue a lifetime of involvement in sports and activities,” she says.

## Provide a Positive Learning Environment

Coordination is something a child develops. Chandler says it’s the parents’ job to provide a learning environment in which their child has fun. He even recommends waiting to conclude the play session until the child achieves his goal. McGuire suggests emphasizing fun and success gives children the freedom to develop skills at their own pace.

“You have to make sure that the time you spend with your child is spent playing games. Kids want to play, they don’t want lessons,” says Chandler. “Make sure your games are goal-oriented and not instruction-oriented, and that they are set up to guarantee that your child meets his or her goal each session.”

– Steve Milano is a sport science author, lecturer and video producer. He has written for such magazines as *Sports Illustrated for Kids’ Parent’s Playbook*, *Fit*, *TennisPro* and *American Golf Professional*.

# Play Games and Develop Skills

Rather than using Little League, tennis lessons or youth soccer to teach your child coordination, play games with your child in the back yard, driveway or park to increase their chances of success (and enjoyment) in sports.

With your help, these simple games can help your child develop the basic sport skills and provide a lifetime of social interaction, self-confidence and fun.

## Footwork/Balance

- Hop-scotch, jump rope and skating help develop the footwork and body balance that is so critical to success in sports.

- Using a jump rope, have your child start jumping with both feet. Have your child then jump with only one foot. Change feet. Have your child alternate feet. Finally, have your child repeat these tasks swinging the rope backward.



## Catching

Step #1 – Young children don't even need a glove. First roll a ball to them and have them stop the ball, pick it up and throw it back. Progress from larger balls to smaller balls. Start close and move farther and farther back as success dictates.

Step #2 – As your child becomes more confident and successful, begin bouncing balls to her.

Step #3 – As your child becomes more confident and successful, begin tossing balls, underhand, to her.

When introducing a glove, start with ground balls. Next, allow your child to catch the ball with the glove open (palm up), making sure he uses two hands to catch. When he is successful, move farther back. The next step is to have him reverse the glove, still using two hands. When he is successful, progress to a one-handed catch.

## Throwing

- Let your child decide whether he wants to throw left-handed or right-handed. Give your child a ball and ask him to throw it –

whichever hand he picks up the ball and throws with is most likely the dominant hand. Make sure you give your child several chances to pick up the ball and throw it to make sure.

- Have your child throw to a number of target areas that require her to throw far, near, left and right, high and low. Children can throw through hula-hoops, at figurines, into boxes, etc.

- With younger children, let them toss balls underhand with two hands, and then overhand with two hands above the head.

## Striking

Step #1 – With very young children, place a large ball on the ground and let your child hit the ball to you. When she can do this consistently, reduce the size of the ball. You may use a bat, hockey stick, golf club or tennis racket.

Step #2 – As your child becomes more proficient, let the child attempt to hit a rolling ball, then a bounced ball.

Step #3 – Introduce a tee using different ball sizes.

Step #4 – Introduce a tossed ball, varying ball sizes as success dictates.

## Kicking

The first step in helping your child develop and improve his or her kicking skills is to establish the contact point.

Step #1 – Keep the ball stationary and have your child kick the ball from a

standing, not running, position. Limit your child to one or two steps before kicking the ball.

Step #2 – Once your child has established the ability to make contact, then let him back up and kick the ball from a running start.

Step #3 – When he's able to successfully kick

the ball from a running start, introduce goals, such as height and direction.

Step #4 – Later, practice kicking a ball you roll or gently kick to her, first kicking it back to you, and then aiming at targets.

