



# Coaching Players of Mixed Skill Levels

*This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.*

**“We have an 8u team with some all-stars and some girls first experiencing pitching. How do we best coach by bringing the young ones up to the level of the older girls? We do not want to lower the level of play of the more experienced girls. We want to be fair, win and have a lot of fun doing it.”**

## PCA Response by Joe Scally, PCA Trainer–Chicago

Because you are coaching ages eight and under, it is fair to say that all of the players have a lot to learn about the sport. It is probably also fair to say that even the all-stars’ skills are unevenly developed, i.e. they are good at some things and need a lot of improvement in others.

Because kids at this age are continually developing mentally, emotionally and physically, and are doing so at varying rates, it is usual to have a team of kids with mixed levels of experience and skill. It is the coach’s job to help the players learn a team concept, learn basic fundamentals, and make progress as an individual.

At this age I think you are right to focus on having a lot of fun. This will keep the girls motivated, working hard, and learning new things. In turn, this will lead to them wanting to play next year. One of the great successes you can have as a coach is to have a team full of players who want to play the sport again next season.

Research shows that having fun, making friends, becoming a better player and other factors are more important to most children than winning on the scoreboard. If you teach skills in a fun and positive environment where every player feels a part of the team, the winning will take care of itself, anyway.

A good start would be to identify the two or three skills in which you would expect most kids at this age to be proficient. Your expectations should be in line with the physical and developmental limitations of your players. Then, develop a season-long practice plan focused on making everyone on the team solid in those areas.

Consult websites, books, other coaches and the players themselves to find fun activities and drills that will focus on those skills. Even the all-stars will enjoy, and benefit from, honing and developing their fundamentals. The players and you will get a lot of satisfaction out of seeing the progress over the course of the season.

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Also, assess all players for their strengths and areas for improvement. Develop a plan to help each one progress. Avoid labeling some players as talented and others as not. Either label will limit a player's development.

Rather, remind your team that effort is the thing that will lead to improvement. Let them know that mistakes are OK because they are necessary for learning. Then, relentlessly praise progress and effort, even when it does not lead to a "successful" outcome. Look for things a player is doing well and point them out to her. For instance, on a swing and miss you may praise the choice to swing, the quality of the swing or some element of it, or the assertiveness shown.

I agree with you that fairness is important. When your players know that you are willing to work to help each of them progress, to encourage them despite mistakes, to give each an opportunity to learn and play different positions, and that you value their effort, they will feel fairly treated.

They'll have learned a valuable lesson that everyone has talents they can contribute to a team effort. You'll have the satisfaction of being a positive influence on each player. Remember that the kid at the end of the bench might one day be a superstar in the sport. It's happened more than once.

*PCA Trainer Joe Scally is a longtime soccer coach based in the Chicago area. Joe spent several years as PCA's national director of training.*

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