How to Teach Young Pitchers to Stay Closed: Drills & Cues

8-14 | Fundamentals | Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

Two summers ago I had an 11-year-old lefty whose dad had spent the whole off-season yelling one thing from behind the backstop: "Stay closed!" The kid had listened. He turned his back almost all the way to the hitter at leg lift, held that position like a statue, and then, the moment his front foot came down, he spun open so fast his glove ended up behind his back. He was missing arm side by three feet, and his elbow was sore after 40 pitches.

He wasn't flying open because nobody had told him to stay closed. He was flying open *because* he had been told to stay closed and had no idea what that actually meant.

The short answer: staying closed means the pitcher's front shoulder and chest stay pointed toward home plate (not at the catcher) until the front foot lands. Then the hips and shoulders rotate hard. You teach it by fixing the stride direction, the glove side and the timing, not by having the kid twist further away from the hitter. For most young pitchers, flying open is a symptom of a stride, balance or aiming problem, and if you fix the cause the shoulder usually takes care of itself.

The rest of this article is how we diagnose it and the drill sequence we use with our 8U through 14U pitchers.

What "staying closed" actually means

"Closed" is one of the most-used and least-defined words in youth pitching. When we say it, we mean one thing: **through the stride, the front side stays aligned toward the target until the front foot plants.** The lead elbow, the front shoulder and the chest all stay pointed at the plate rather than turning to face the catcher early.

What it does *not* mean:

- Turning the back to the hitter at leg lift.
- Locking the upper body rigid like a board.
- Landing with the front foot pointed at third base (for a righty).
- Delaying rotation after foot strike. Once that front foot is down, the pitcher *should* rotate, fast.

Staying closed is a **timing event**, not a posture. The goal is to keep the shoulders closed slightly longer than the hips so the body can store energy and release it in the right order. If you want the deeper version of that sequence, our breakdown of trunk rotation mechanics for youth pitchers walks through the hip-shoulder separation side of it.

What flying open looks like, and why it matters

A pitcher who flies open lets the front shoulder, glove and chest pull toward first base (for a righty) before or right as the front foot lands. From the side, you'll see the chest facing the catcher at foot strike. From behind, you'll see the glove fly out wide and the front shoulder peel away.

It costs three things:

1. **Command.** When the front side opens early, the release point moves all over. The classic pattern is a righty missing up and arm side (high and outside to a right-handed hitter), or a kid who yanks the ball into the dirt when he tries to compensate.
2. **Velocity.** The energy the legs and hips generate leaks out the front side instead of transferring up through the trunk to the arm. These are the kids who throw harder in catch play than on the mound.
3. **Arm health.** When the body opens early, the arm gets left behind and has to catch up on its own. That puts more of the work

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Why young pitchers fly open: the five causes we see most

This is where most articles stop at "the upper body follows the hips." That's true, but it doesn't help you coach. When a kid in our program flies open, it's almost always one of these:

1. Stride direction. If a righty strides toward the first-base side of the plate (open), his body has no choice but to open with it. A stride that goes too far across his body (closed) often makes him fly open *harder* to get the ball back to the plate. Check the stride before you check the shoulder.

2. A dead glove side. After the hands break, a lot of young pitchers let the glove drift away from the body and drop. The glove controls the front shoulder. If the glove flies out to the side, the shoulder follows it.

3. Balance at leg lift. A kid who rocks back or leans toward first at the top of the leg lift is already open before he starts moving forward. A balanced posting position is a prerequisite for everything else.

4. Aiming. This is the one nobody talks about, and I see it constantly with first-year kid-pitch players. They're scared of walking the batter or hitting him, so they open up early to *see* the catcher's mitt longer and steer the ball. The fix is not a mechanical cue. It's reps, a lower-stakes environment and a coach who says "let it go" instead of "throw strikes." We cover that mindset side in our first-year kid pitch tips.

5. Overcorrecting a coached "stay closed." This was my lefty. When a kid winds up too far, turning his shoulders or hips toward second base, he has to unwind further and faster to get back to the plate. That usually means he starts rotating early and ends up *more* open at release, not less. Pitching educators have been pushing back on the bare "stay closed" cue for exactly this reason, and we agree: closed and stable are not the same thing.

Age matters: what to expect at 8, 11 and 14

8–9 years old: Don't chase it much. Teach a balanced leg lift, a straight stride toward the target and a glove that stays in front. If those three are in place, most of the early opening goes away on its own. Mechanics at this age should stay simple, so keep the checklist short.

10–12 years old: This is the window where staying closed becomes a real coaching point. Kids are strong enough to separate hips from shoulders a little, and stride length is growing. Most of our drill work below lives here.

13–14 years old: Now you can talk about the hips leading and the shoulders holding, and use video to show separation. Growth spurts often bring back old habits for a few months. Long limbs, less coordination, and a kid who stayed closed fine last spring suddenly flies open. Be patient and go back to the stride and glove basics.

The phone-video checkpoint

You don't need a pitching lab. You need a phone, propped up at waist height, about 15 feet to the pitcher's open side (third-base side for a righty), filming in slow motion.

Find the frame where the front foot first lands. Then ask:

- **Is the chest pointed at the catcher or at the plate's side?** At landing, you want to still see more of the pitcher's front shoulder than his chest.
- **Where is the glove?** It should be out in front, roughly over the front foot, not flung out toward first base.
- **Where's the front toe pointing?** Slightly closed (a few degrees toward the throwing-arm side) is normal. Pointing at the dugout is a stride problem.

Then film once from behind the mound to check stride direction. Lay a strip of tape from the middle of the rubber to the plate; the front foot should land on or just across that line.

Do this before you assign a single drill. You'll often find that a "flying open" problem is really a stride problem, and the drill choice changes completely. Our article on how to assess a youth pitcher before assigning drills has the full checklist.

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Drill sequence: teaching a young pitcher to stay closed

We run these in order, usually as a 15-minute block during catch play or bullpen days. Don't move a kid to the next drill until the current one looks clean. A drill-video breakdown we saw from a pitching development channel this season made the same point we've learned the hard way: the lead arm and trunk timing have to be trained together, not as separate pieces.

Step 1 — Balance Post Hold (3 min) From the stretch, the pitcher lifts to a balanced posting position and holds for a three-count. No leaning toward first, no rocking toward second. Front shoulder points at the plate, hands at the chest. If he wobbles, he's not ready to move forward yet. Coaching cue: "Stand tall like a flagpole, then go."

Step 2 — Tape Line Strides (3 min) Lay a tape line from the center of the rubber toward the plate. The pitcher strides from the post position and freezes at landing, no throw. Check that the front foot lands on or just across the line with the toe slightly closed. Ten strides, then add a soft throw. Coaching cue: "Walk the line to the catcher."

Step 3 — Glove Over the Front Foot (3 min) From the stride position (feet already apart), the pitcher throws to a partner at 30–40 feet focusing only on the glove. At release, the glove should be in front of the chest, tucked toward the body, roughly above the front knee. Not flung out wide. Coaching cue: "Bring the wall to you," meaning the chest moves to the glove rather than the glove pulling away.

Step 4 — Hip-Lead Walk-Throughs (3 min) From the post, the pitcher leads with the front hip pocket toward the target before the foot comes down, while the front shoulder and glove stay pointed at the plate. Slow motion first, then half speed with a throw. This is where the kid feels the hips going while the shoulders hold. Coaching cue: "Hip pocket to the catcher, shoulder stays home."

Step 5 — Fence Drill for Overrotators (3 min) For kids who wind up too far (cause #5), stand them sideways about a foot from a fence or net with their back to it. If their hands or back hip touch the fence at leg lift, they've coiled too far. Ten dry reps, then five throws from the same setup. Coaching cue: "Turn, don't twist."

Cues that work and cues that don't

What we say matters as much as the drills. Kids take cues literally.

Cues that work: - "Show the hitter your front shoulder longer." This is better than "stay closed" because it's specific. - "Glove stays in front of your belly button." - "Land, then turn." - "Walk the line."

Cues that backfire: - "Stay closed." Too vague, and it's often what creates the overrotation. - "Turn your back to the hitter." Invites the over-coil. - "Don't open up." Telling a kid what *not* to do rarely helps.

And give one cue at a time. A 10-year-old thinking about his glove, his stride and the strike zone at the same time will fail at all three. Pick the one that fixes the root cause from your video, and stay on it for a week. Many of the classic youth pitching mistakes come from piling on fixes faster than the kid can absorb them.

How the lower half fits in

A lot of flying open starts below the waist. A pitcher with weak or uncontrolled legs can't keep a stable front side, because his landing collapses and the upper body bails out to compensate. If your pitcher's front knee buckles or he falls off toward first after release, spend time on the lower half. Our guide on how to use your legs when pitching and some simple hip mobility work help more than another round of shoulder cues.

For under-12 kids especially, general athleticism matters: balance work, single-leg hops, skipping and multi-sport play all build the body control that makes staying closed possible. A kid who can't balance on one leg for five seconds isn't going to hold his front side through a stride.

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Equipment that helps (but isn't required)

You can run every drill above with a roll of tape and a partner. If you want to make bullpen work more consistent, a stride mat or a pitching target with marked zones helps kids see the result of a clean front side. We stock pitching targets and training gear at theranchsports.com.

Bottom line

Staying closed isn't about twisting away from the hitter. It's about keeping the front shoulder and glove aimed at the plate until the front foot lands, then rotating hard. When a young pitcher flies open, check the stride, the glove and the balance at leg lift before you blame the shoulder, and watch for the kid who's opening up because he's scared of missing. Film it, pick one cause, give one cue, and let him get reps. For more pitching and practice resources, visit our youth baseball coaching hub.

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