

Youth Pitching Mistakes Every Coach Should Know & Fix

Fundamentals

Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

I had a kid last spring — strong arm, good athleticism, plenty of velocity for his age — who couldn't throw three consecutive strikes in a bullpen session. His dad pulled me aside after practice and asked if his son needed a private pitching coach. But after watching a few minutes, I didn't see a broken arm action. I saw a kid who had been given so many mechanical corrections over two seasons that he'd stopped moving like an athlete and started trying to think his way through every pitch.

That's the real youth pitching problem. Not a short stride or a wrapped arm path — those are symptoms. The deeper issue is coaches who reach for the mechanical toolbox before young pitchers have built the athletic foundation that mechanics are supposed to sit on. I've been that coach. Most of us have.

The short answer: The most common youth pitching mistakes coaches make are (1) layering mechanical cues onto pitchers who don't yet have basic athletic body control and balance, (2) rushing young arms to off-speed pitches before they can command their fastball, and (3) treating pitch count as someone else's concern. The fix starts with one principle: throw strikes first, mechanics second, off-speed pitches third — and in that order, over multiple seasons.

Mistake 1: Teaching Mechanics Before Athletic Control

This one bites us the most, and it's the hardest to admit because teaching mechanics feels productive. We explain the hip drive, the hand break, the landing position — and it looks like coaching. But if a pitcher doesn't have basic balance and the body control to repeat a delivery athletically, those cues have nowhere to land.

Coach Dan Blewett, whose work we use as a reference in our program, identifies the foundations young pitchers need before advancing to complex mechanics: athletic body control, balance in the delivery, a consistent arm path, and the ability to throw strikes on demand — in that order. Advanced mechanics such as hip-to-shoulder separation drills, precise arm-path work, and spin-rate focus come after those foundations are genuinely solid, not before.

What this looks like in practice: before you correct a pitcher's hand break or drive mechanics, ask whether he can throw five out of ten pitches within the strike zone in a bullpen session. If the answer is no, mechanics are not your primary problem. Athleticism and feel for the zone are.

The fix: Start new pitchers with balance-first reps. Have them throw from a simple set position — no full wind-up — focusing only on landing in a straight line toward the plate and finishing tall over the front leg. Reintroduce the wind-up only after the simplified delivery looks controlled and repeatable across multiple sessions.

Our guide to pitching mechanics for 8 and 10 year olds builds exactly this foundation before introducing more complex sequencing.

Mistake 2: Adding Off-Speed Pitches Too Early

I've seen 9-year-olds throw curveballs in tournaments while walking six batters a game. The curveball didn't help them get hitters out — it just gave them two pitches they couldn't command instead of one.

The standard we use in our program: a pitcher owns the fastball when he can consistently hit both corners — inside and outside, up and down — across a 15-pitch bullpen. That is the bar. Until he clears it reliably over multiple sessions, we don't add a changeup, curveball, or anything else. When we do introduce a secondary pitch, the changeup almost always comes first, and rarely before a pitcher is 12 or 13.

philosophical concern.

The fix: Run a "3 for 3 Command Challenge" at practice — the pitcher tries to throw three consecutive strikes to a called spot (down and away, up and in). Once he clears that standard reliably across several sessions, only then introduce the changeup. Give the changeup its own command challenge at the same standard before any breaking ball is added.

For more on timing this decision well across different age groups, see our article on when to teach youth pitchers a changeup.

Mistake 3: Static Drills That Don't Transfer to the Mound

Balance beams, pause-and-hold at the top of the wind-up, one-knee throwing — these show up in nearly every youth pitching curriculum, and in small doses they have a place. The problem is when they become the majority of a pitcher's development time.

Static drills teach body position. They do not teach the dynamic sequencing, momentum, and rhythm that a full pitch requires. A pitcher who's spent three months pausing at the balance point and almost no time throwing at full intent will struggle when game speed demands that every phase fires in sequence without a pause built in.

What transfers better is constraint-based movement — setting up a game or physical constraint that forces the right movement pattern rather than prescribing it as a freeze-frame position. Full-speed reps with competitive purpose develop the sequencing that static drills cannot. Our constraint-based pitching drills for youth baseball covers a full session structure built around this principle.

The fix: Limit static drills to the warm-up or to introducing a brand-new concept. Move to full-delivery throws quickly, and add competitive pressure as soon as a pitcher can roughly repeat the movement you've just introduced.

Mistake 4: Ignoring Stride Length and Landing Direction

These are two specific mechanical issues worth singling out because they affect command directly — and fixing them doesn't require a full mechanical overhaul.

Stride length: Most youth pitchers stride too short — often only 60–70% of their height. A full, explosive stride moves the release point closer to the plate, improving both velocity and command. The goal over time is 90–100% of body height. A short stride pushes the release point farther from home, making location harder regardless of arm action.

Landing direction: A pitcher who lands closed (for a righty, lead foot pointing toward third base) restricts hip rotation before it's complete. A pitcher who lands open (foot pointing toward first base) throws his front side wide and loses direction to the plate. Both create command problems that look like arm issues but are footwork problems.

The fix: Use tape or chalk lines on your mound or flat ground. Draw two parallel lines extending from the rubber toward the plate at roughly shoulder width — the pitcher's lead foot should land between them, toe pointing directly at the catcher. A week of focused landing-direction reps often resolves command problems that looked mechanical and unfixable.

Mistake 5: Treating Pitch Count as a Game-Only Rule

Most leagues have game pitch count limits, and most youth coaches follow them. But practice throwing — bullpen sessions, warm-up pitching, infield and outfield reps, long toss — often goes completely untracked.

A kid who throws 50 pitches in a Saturday game, 30 pitches in a "light" Monday bullpen, and 20 warm-up pitches on Wednesday has thrown 100 pitches in that recovery window. That's too much for a 10-year-old arm regardless of how the load was distributed.

The standard we follow: after a game outing, no bullpen throwing for at least 48 hours, no competitive throwing until the arm reports as normal through catch play. A heavy game outing — 50 or more pitches — means a minimum of three days before any bullpen. This isn't overprotection; it's how arms stay healthy through a full season and across multiple seasons.

The fix: Track all throws, not just in-game pitches. A simple note per pitcher — date, context (game, bullpen, long toss),

Mistake 6: Never Creating Competitive Pressure in Practice

Here's the gap nearly every article on this topic misses: pitchers learn to compete under pressure by competing under pressure, and most bullpen sessions carry no consequence at all. A kid can bounce five pitches in the dirt, shake it off, and keep going — and the only thing he learns is that a bad pitch costs nothing.

In a real game, every pitch carries the count, the base situation, and the inning. A pitcher who's never experienced any version of that arrives at his first game start with mechanics intact and competitive instincts completely undeveloped. I've watched this happen on our own team — two of our most technically sound practice pitchers completely unraveled in their first game starts, not because the mechanics broke down but because the competitive context was new. Once we started running pressure reps at practice, both of them settled into their game outings within a couple of weeks.

The fix: Build stakes into every bullpen session. Three formats we use regularly:

- **9-Pitch Challenge:** Pitcher works through three 3-pitch sequences to called spots. Earns a point for each on-target pitch. Track cumulative points across a season — kids compete intensely for their own record.
- **Battle the Lineup:** Pitcher throws to a simulated lineup. We track "at-bats" using location and movement. A ball counts as a walk; three balls in a row and the runner is on. Engagement goes up immediately.
- **Pressure Inning:** Pitcher faces five consecutive live batters in practice — real pitch counts, real walks, real strikeouts tracked on a card. One inning, real stakes, full attention.

None of these require a game day. They just require making the rep matter.

Drill Sequence: Athletic Foundation Before Mechanics

Run this sequence before every pitching session. It activates athletic movement patterns first so mechanics can follow naturally:

Step 1 — Balance Step-Offs (5 min) No ball. Pitcher stands on a two-by-four or balance board and practices his stride — load, lift, step, land — focusing only on staying tall and landing in a straight line toward the plate. Coaching cue: "Tall to the target, not falling toward it."

Step 2 — Set-Position Strike Challenge (10 min) Pitcher throws from a flat-ground set position at 45–50 feet to a catcher or target. Goal is 7 of 10 pitches within the zone. No wind-up, no mechanics cues — just find the zone. Coaching cue: "Find the zone before you find velocity."

Step 3 — Full Delivery at 75% Effort (10 min) Full wind-up, full stride — but deliberate effort, not full intent. Building feel for the delivery sequence (load, stride, drive, arm, finish) without velocity overwhelming body awareness. Coaching cue: "Check your finish — where did your arm end up after every pitch?"

Step 4 — Corner Spot Work (10 min) Catcher sets up on the outer corner, then inner corner. Pitcher calls his target before each pitch and works one side at a time. An adjustable youth strike zone target makes corner work more measurable — we use one from theranchsports.com, usually available at 10% off with no sales tax. Coaching cue: "Pick a spot, throw to the spot — not to the catcher's body."

Step 5 — Competitive Close-Out (10 min) End with one of the competitive formats from Mistake 6 above. The pitcher has built zone feel through steps 1–4; this final block applies it under pressure. Coaching cue: "Everything you just built — now use it when something is on the line."

Pair this sequence with the physical arm preparation side in our pregame warm-up routine for youth pitchers, which covers the dynamic throwing warm-up that should precede this drill work.

Coaching young pitchers well comes down to one discipline we have to practice as coaches: resisting the urge to add more — more mechanics, more pitch types, more corrections per session. The pitchers we've seen develop the fastest over a full career, from 8U through high school, were almost always the ones who completely mastered the basics before advancing. Athletic body control, balance, fastball command, competitive composure. Those four things, fully developed, carry a pitcher further than any curveball grip ever will. More resources on building pitchers the right way are in our youth baseball coaching hub.