

Curve balls for Kids?

There is more than one school of thought when it comes to the philosophy of youth baseball pitchers throwing curve balls. I have my own opinions, some based on reading articles from doctors, some based on being a college coach, some based on coaching boys from the ages of 9 through high school, and some based on my experience as a parent of a pitcher.

I have seen kids at ages 10 through 12 throwing curve balls. Even thrown incorrectly it can be an effective pitch that gets young hitters out. Sometimes it even makes hitters look pretty silly at the plate. What often happens when a young kid is successful throwing a curve ball is that he falls in love with the pitch—because the hitters can't hit it. Usually coaches fall in love with it, too, because it makes it easier to get hitters out and ultimately win more games. Sometimes coaches encourage the pitchers to throw more curve balls when there is some success with it, and the only reason a coach would encourage that is because he thinks that winning is more important than the development of his players.

Just last summer I saw a ten year old kid who was bigger and stronger than any other kid in the post-season tournament he played in. He also threw harder than any other player there, and batters were obviously frightened by the velocity of his fastball. His control was mediocre, at best. He was throwing a curve ball approximately 25% of the time, even though he didn't need to throw that pitch to get the hitters out. At ten years old, he was already as tall as his father, whom I was told had also been a phenomenal youth pitcher and an early maturer.

In the case above, I would suggest to a coach or parent that the big kid should try to master his fastball and changeup. Perhaps if he threw more fastballs he would develop more control, or mastery, of the pitch. In addition, the development of the changeup will be important if the player is going to continue into high school baseball and even beyond. As pitchers advance in age, the changeup is a pitch that could be extremely effective, but it seems to be an under-taught pitch. I have personally coached many college freshmen who had previously rarely thrown changeups.

In my opinion, the bottom line with regard to young pitchers throwing curve balls is that they need to be taught the pitch correctly and practice it with quality drill work before they ever throw curves in games. The drill work should be monitored by coaches and done at short distances using low velocity. Proper mechanics should be stressed and constant feedback should be given to the pitchers.

What I do with young pitchers is to teach the fastball and changeup grips to them up to age 12. They should be able to throw two-seam and four-seam fastballs and a changeup for strikes 65-70% of the time by the time they are age 12. When they get to be about 13, I feel pretty good about teaching them a breaking (curve) ball grip, mechanics, and introduce them to a couple short distance flat ground drills to develop proper

fundamentals and rotation of the curve ball. I would not suggest that 13 year olds throw curves in games.

At the age of 14 I continue working curve ball drills into practices, and then would allow the pitchers to throw them in game situations, but only under certain conditions. I would not let them throw curves in games if their mechanics are not sound.

What I did when I coached my son's teams at 13 and 14 was to finally let them throw curves in games at about July 1st of their 14 year old summer. I had specific rules for when they could throw curves, and I only allowed them to do so when they had a 0-1 count and a 1-2 count on the batter. My reasoning for this was that I wanted them to be able to throw a first pitch strike with a fastball or changeup. In addition, I wanted them to learn to throw a quality fastball out of the strike zone on 0-2 before they threw another curve. This worked for the development of my son and his teammates.

Ultimately, I believe that throwing the curveball at young ages retards the development of the fastball. In other words, when kids spend time throwing curve balls, they are not throwing fastballs. Throwing fastballs and incorporating some sort of long toss program to aid in the development of velocity growth is essential if a kid is going to continue to have success as a pitcher. Often, if a pitcher throws a lot of breaking balls at young ages, his fastball velocity does not develop as well as it could develop.

Having legitimate fastball velocity is what gets pitchers more opportunities to advance as quality high school pitchers and perhaps into college.

Therefore, even if throwing curves does not injure a young pitcher's arm, it may prevent him from developing a fastball with enough velocity to get quality hitters out.