



## SKILL GUIDE

A program of the **National ALLIANCE**  
For Youth Sports



**This Skill Guide was created for your staff and participants.  
Enclosed you will find information about the Start Smart  
Sports Development Program including:**

- **Activities with performance cues to continue practicing at home after the completion of the program.**
- **The Readiness Assessment with ways to interpret your participants' scores.**

**While teaching your participants all of these skills,  
please remember that the #1 goal is FUN!!!**

### WHAT IS THE START SMART SPORTS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM?

Start Smart teaches children (ages 3-7) the basic motor skills necessary to play organized sports, while they work one-on-one and spend quality time with a member of your staff. The program focuses on teaching children and their parents basic sports mechanics without the threat of competition or the fear of getting hurt. The Start Smart Development Program encourages the staff and volunteers to work with the children throughout the 3 to 6 week program.

### WHY START SMART?

Before entering organized youth sports programs, children need to master the fundamental motor skills that serve as a basis for more complex sports skills. Children do not effectively learn these skills by playing games, but rather by learning and practicing *developmentally appropriate activities*.

Developmentally appropriate activities are tasks that are designed for the current level of performance ability of the child with equipment that enables the child to be successful. Success is extremely important in early motor skill learning experiences, as it builds self-esteem and the motivation and confidence needed to try and improve.

Children who enter youth sports programs with fundamental motor skills and confidence in their ability to perform are much more likely to learn new, more complex sport-specific skills, achieve success in competition, and enjoy a positive sports experience. These children are also more likely to participate in sports and fitness activities as adults.

All children should be provided with effective, developmentally appropriate activities and equipment to prepare them for future organized sports competitions. Start Smart accomplishes this by offering programs that encourage children to develop their skills, without the threat of competition or the fear of getting hurt.



## PROGRAM GUIDELINES

These guidelines should be emphasized to ensure that the children obtain high levels of success and achievement during the Start Smart program.

**Positive Learning Environment:** Children must be provided with a positive non-threatening learning environment where they receive a great deal of encouragement and success.

**Children are Unique:** All children are unique and learn at different rates. It takes them much effort and many practice trials to improve.

**Maximum Involvement:** Each child needs the opportunity to practice skills learned. START SMART activities are organized to provide children optimal time to practice skills at the same time. To maximize individual practice time, equipment is provided for each instructor-child group.

**Success is Important:** The child should experience high success rates on a task. Modify the task if it is difficult for the child to succeed. Once success is attained, increase the difficulty of the task incrementally. An example of modifying a task is changing the distance a ball must travel.

**Appropriate Equipment:** The equipment must be developmentally appropriate for the child. Start Smart provides equipment that is the appropriate size and weight for this age group.

**Keep it Simple:** Children are not "little adults." They learn and comprehend differently than adults. In the early learning stages, keep it simple by demonstrating exactly what you want them to do.

**Positive Feedback:** Clear, concise, and positive feedback from the staff regarding the child's performance and effort will enhance learning.

**Expect Success:** All kids need lots of encouragement and a feeling that your only expectations are that they learn and improve. If you expect success, children will have the confidence to believe that they are capable of succeeding in the particular task.

**Complete Tasks Before Continuing:** Start Smart activities are organized from simple to more complex. A child should complete one task successfully before moving on to the next exercise.

**Review Tasks:** Children will benefit from reviewing previously completed tasks. This practice is especially helpful if they are having difficulty with the task at hand.



## THROWING

### Activities and Performance Cues

#### Equipment

- Use an appropriate ball for throwing activities to teach children the proper form of an overhand and underhand throw. We recommend and use the *Koosh Ball* in the Start Smart Sports Development Program because it was proven to be a good motor skill development tool.

#### Skills

- To focus on distance, have the child:
  - Throw a ball at a large target such as a wall.
  - Throw a ball beyond a marked line.
- To focus on accuracy, have the child:
  - Throw a ball into a hula hoop (or marked circle) on the ground.
  - Throw a ball at a hula hoop (or taped circle) on a wall.
  - Throw a ball at milk jugs or soft drink containers on a table or bench.

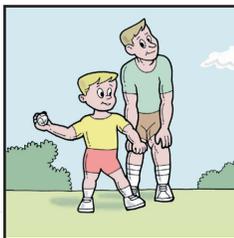


#### Overhand Throw

Stand sideways to the target.

Hand and arm way back.

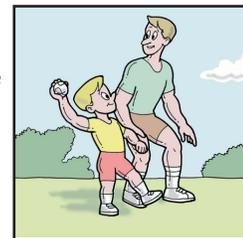
Big step towards target with opposite foot.



Shoulder first, then elbow, forearm, and hand forward.

Bellybutton to the target as the child throws.

Throw as hard as you can!

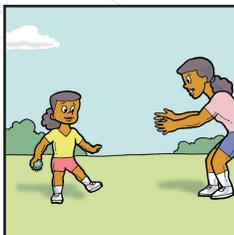


#### Underhand Throw

Face the target.

Hand and arm way back behind the child's body.

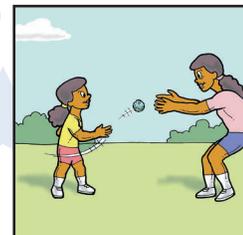
Big step towards target with opposite foot.



Swing arm and ball down and forward.

Shift weight forward.

Release ball in front of body.





## CATCHING

### Activities and Performance Cues

**Note:** "Give" with the ball means to have the child absorb the impact of the ball by bringing it into their body as he/she catches it.

#### Equipment

Use an appropriate ball to teach children how to catch. We recommend and use a large ball in the beginning to give the children a big target. As the class progresses and the children show improvement, we recommend that they use the *Koosh Ball* because it is easy to catch, does not roll away if they miss, and can be absorbed into their hands or glove.

#### Skills

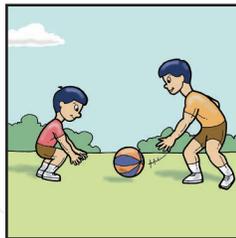
- To practice catching a rolling ball:
  - Have the child roll a large ball away from him/herself and get in front of the ball to catch it.
  - Roll the ball back-and-forth between a member of your staff and child.
- To practice catching a ball in the air, have the child:
  - Bounce or throw the ball to him/herself.
  - Catch a ball thrown by a staff member or volunteer.
  - Catch a ball as it rebounds from the wall.
  - Move a few steps to the right or left as a staff member or volunteer throws the ball to the right or left.

(These activities should be performed with a large ball, then the *Regular Koosh Ball*, and then the *Regular Koosh Ball* and *Franklin Sports Glove*.)

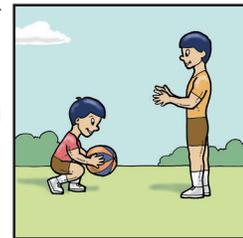


#### Catching a Rolling Ball

- Move in front of the ball.
- Bend knees and stay low.
- Reach out.

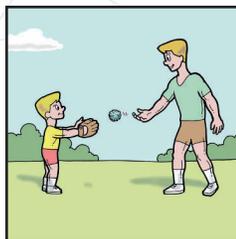


- Watch the ball into your hand or glove.
- Squeeze the ball.
- "Give" with the ball and bring to the body.

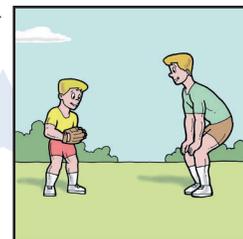


#### Catching a Ball in the Air

- Bend knees slightly.
- Reach out.



- Watch the ball into your hand or glove.
- Squeeze the ball.
- "Give" with the ball.



## KICKING

### Activities and Performance Cues

#### Equipment

- Use a soccer ball or other large ball to practice kicking and stopping a rolling ball.

#### Skills

- To practice kicking a ball for distance, have the child:
  - Kick a stationary ball beyond a marked line.
  - Take 2-3 steps as a running start before kicking the ball beyond the line.
  - Kick the ball to a staff member or volunteer who is standing at increasing distances from the child.
- To practice kicking a ball for accuracy, have the child:
  - Kick to a target.
  - Dribble around cones.
  - Kick the ball through two cones placed close together.
  - Pass the ball back-and-forth with a staff member or volunteer.
- To practice stopping a rolling ball, have the child:
  - Stop a ball that is rolled or kicked from a staff member or volunteer.



### Kicking a Ball

Step behind and to the side of the ball with your non-kicking foot.

Kicking leg should be back, knee bent, and toes pointed.

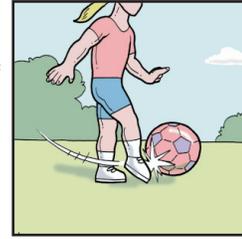


Swing kicking leg forward, straighten knee at contact.

Contact behind and in center of ball with the top of your shoe for long and low kicks.

Contact behind and to the bottom of ball with the top of your shoe for high kicks.

Point toes.



Arms out to your sides during kick.

Follow through high with leg.

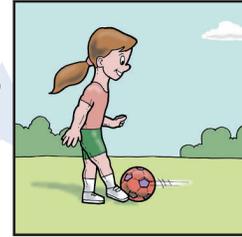


### Stopping a Rolling Ball

Turn toes out with your stopping foot.

Watch ball to side of foot.

Keep foot flexed and "give" - keep your knees bent.



## BATTING

### Activities and Performance Cues

#### Equipment

- To begin, use a batting tee with a large ball to teach children how to swing and hit a ball. As the children show improvement, use a smaller ball to give them a more precise target.

#### Skills

- To practice batting from a tee:
  - Hit a large ball past a marked line.
  - Hit a smaller ball past a marked line.
- To practice batting without a tee, have the child:
  - Hit a ball that is tossed from a staff member or volunteer.
  - Hit a ball tossed from the side by a staff member or volunteer. (First use a large ball and then a smaller ball).
  - Hit a balloon that was tossed from a staff member or volunteer.



### Batting from a Tee

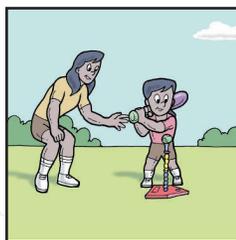
Stand facing the tee.

Stand slightly behind and a bat's length to the side of the tee.

Place your dominant hand on the top of the grip, and your other hand on the bottom.

Bat back, over your back shoulder.

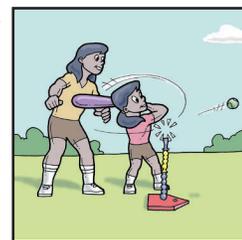
Keep your eyes on the ball.



Step to the side with your non-dominant foot, swing level and hard.

Transfer weight to your front foot.

Follow through.



### Batting without a Tee

Stand with your non-dominant side facing the target.

Stand slightly behind and a bat's length to the side of the "base".

Place your dominant hand on the top of the grip, and your other hand on the bottom.

Bat back, over your back shoulder.

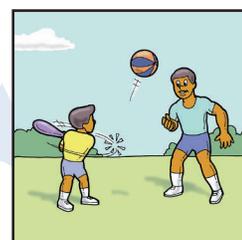
Keep your eyes on the ball.



Step to the side with your non-dominant foot, swing level and hard.

Transfer weight to your front foot.

Follow through.





## READINESS ASSESSMENT INTRODUCTION

### *When are the children assessed?*

Children should be assessed prior to beginning the Start Smart Sports Development Program and then after completing the program to gauge progress.

### *Why are the children assessed?*

The Readiness Assessment is qualitative, meaning it focuses on performing the skill movement correctly by following the performance cues. After the assessment is complete, read the “Interpreting Assessment Scores” section of this guide as it will determine the child’s level of sport readiness.

### *How should the assessment be administered?*

Read the directions and set-up for each skill area in this guide. Understand that **the assessment is NOT used to rank or score any of the children, and the scores are for the eyes of the staff only.**

**\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*** Do not give the child any additional instructions other than what is provided to ensure the accuracy of the assessment results.

### *How should the children be scored during the assessment?*

Use the score sheets provided in your guide for the qualitative skill assessment. Give a “✓” for each component that is observed, and an “X” if the component is not observed. The child should take as many trials as necessary for you to assess each component individually.



## THROWING ASSESSMENT

### *Throwing Assessment Set Up and Equipment Requirements*

On a large wall (at least 10 feet high by 20 feet wide), mark a circle eight feet in diameter with either chalk or marking tape. Use the *Koosb Ball* for this Assessment.

### *Instructions*

The child gets one practice throw and then six additional throws to get the ball inside the circle from the designated throwing line. The child may step over the line when throwing.

### *Verbal Instructions to the Child*

“Stand behind the line when you throw. You may step over it when you throw. You will get one practice throw and then the next six are for scores. Throw the ball as hard as you can and try to hit the center of the circle.”

## THROWING ASSESSMENT *(continued)*

<b>Overhand Throwing Task Components</b>	<b>PreAssessment</b>	<b>PostAssessment</b>
Child faces non-dominant side toward the target before throwing.		
Child takes ball back behind their head.		
Child’s belly button rotates toward the target while throwing.		
Child’s shoulder rotates toward the target during the throw.		
Child steps toward the target with body weight shifting forward.		
Child’s throwing arm follows through across and in front of body.		

<b>Underhand Throwing Task Components</b>	<b>PreAssessment</b>	<b>PostAssessment</b>
Child faces the target.		
Child brings their arm down and behind their body.		
Child swings arm and ball down and forward.		
Child steps toward the target with body weight shifting forward.		
Child releases ball in front of body.		



## CATCHING ASSESSMENT

### *Catching Assessment Set Up and Equipment Requirements*

Mark off 2 lines on the floor (10 feet apart). Have the children stand on one line and the staff member or volunteer stand on the other line. The staff member or volunteer should stand facing the participant while holding a *Koosh Ball*.

#### **Instructions**

The staff member or volunteer tosses the *Koosh Ball* in an arc to the child so that the child does not have to take more than one step to catch the ball. If the child moves more than one step and does not catch the ball, the trial should be taken over.

#### **Verbal Instructions to the Child**

“Stand on the line and when I toss you the ball try to catch it with your hands before it hits the ground. You can step over the line to catch the ball.”

Catching Task Components	PreAssessment	PostAssessment
Child’s hands move forward to meet the ball.		
Child steps toward the ball while attempting to catch.		
Child maintains eye contact with the ball throughout the catch.		
Child’s fingers point outward with thumbs toward each other for the catch.		
Child’s hands and arms “give” to absorb the force of the ball.		
Child uses only hands to catch the ball... does not “hug” the ball with arms.		



## KICKING ASSESSMENT

### *Kicking Assessment Set Up and Equipment Requirements*

On a large wall (at least 10 feet high by 20 feet wide), mark a rectangle six feet wide by eight feet high with either chalk or marking tape. Mark a line 20 feet away from the wall. Use the soccer ball for this assessment.

#### **Instructions**

The ball is placed on the 20-foot line and the child stands behind the line, runs up to the ball, and kicks it trying to hit the target area on the wall.

#### **Verbal Instructions to the Child**

“Stand behind the line, move to the ball and kick it as hard as you can to the target. You may cross over the line as you kick the ball.”

Kicking Task Components	PreAssessment	PostAssessment
Child’s non-kicking foot is slightly behind and to the side of the ball.		
Child’s kicking leg is brought back behind the supporting leg with knee bent.		
Child’s body is leaning slightly backwards away from the target area.		
Child’s kicking leg swings forward and straightens during contact.		
Child’s foot contacts the ball in the center of ball with top of foot - not the toes.		
Child’s arms are extended at sides for balance during the kick.		



## BATTING ASSESSMENT

### *Batting Assessment Set Up and Equipment Requirements*

In an open area, mark off 2 lines (15 feet apart). Participants will need a batting tee (or something comparable), a bat and the soft foam ball.

#### **Instructions**

Place the tee on one of the marked lines. The child stands next to the tee with his/her non-dominant side facing the target area. The child will try to hit the foam ball off the tee so that it travels over the other 15-foot line.

#### **Verbal Instructions to the Child**

“Stand facing the batting tee with the bat in your hands ready to swing when I say ‘go’. Try to hit the ball hard so that it goes in the air and lands past the line.”

Batting Task Components	PreAssessment	PostAssessment
Child’s dominant hand is on top of the grip.		
Child’s bat is drawn back over the shoulder with arms extended.		
Child’s hips and shoulders rotate during the forward swing.		
Child steps forward or transfers weight forward during the swing.		
Child’s eyes are focused on the ball.		
Child swings bat in a horizontal plane with a follow through.		



## INTERPRETING THE ASSESSMENT SCORES

### *Children Learn at Different Rates*

These assessments were developed to give professionals and parents an educated *estimate* of when children are ready to begin participation in organized sports programs. Motor skill specialists agree, in all aspects of children's development, that all children go through basically the same skill sequence of motor skill development, but not necessarily at the same rate or time. For a variety of reasons, all children do not reach the same level of skill performance at the same time. For example, there may be a wide range of performance scores on the qualitative assessment tests in a group of children who are all the same age. This is to be expected, and should be considered "normal."

### *Be Patient with your Participant's Progress*

As a child proceeds through the Start Smart Sports Development Program, you will constantly be evaluating his/her progress. As the child meets the goals for each task, he/she is then ready to move onto the next task. If not, it simply means that the child needs more practice and encouragement to perform the task. It does NOT mean that the child does not have the ability or will never be able to perform the task.

Be careful not to compare the children to one another. Remember that children develop and learn on different timelines. Be patient, and give the children lots of encouragement and opportunities to practice tasks.

Do not rush the children out of this developmental program into a competitive sports program before they are ready. Remember that children must not only be physically ready to play organized sports, but it is important that they are emotionally ready as well. The children may benefit more during this time by experiencing success and will gain confidence in their abilities by continuing in the Start Smart Sports Development Program.

### *Interpreting the Qualitative Assessment*

Each child should reach a "mature level" in each skill by age six, and definitely before entering an organized sports program. A "mature level" is achieved when all of the described task components on the assessment are consistently demonstrated when performing the particular skill.

If one or more of the components is not observed when the child performs the skill, then more practice and instruction is needed and the staff and child should focus on these remaining components. After the child has demonstrated a "mature level" on all skills (the child consistently demonstrates that he/she can accomplish all of the tasks in the skill assessment), then he/she has met the minimum skills necessary to begin organized sports.

National  
**ALLIANCE**  
For Youth Sports

2050 Vista Parkway  
West Palm Beach, FL 33411  
1-800-729-2057  
[www.nays.org](http://www.nays.org)

BSE 270069



Better SPORTS For KIDS



Better KIDS For LIFE

National  
**ALLIANCE**  
For Youth Sports



A program of the

National  
**ALLIANCE**  
For Youth Sports

2050 Vista Parkway  
West Palm Beach, FL 33411  
1-800-729-2057  
[www.nays.org](http://www.nays.org)