



# Participant Manual

A program of the

*National*  
**ALLIANCE**  
*For Youth Sports*

**This Participant Manual was created as a guide for parents. Enclosed you will find information about the Start Smart Baseball program including:**

- **Activities with performance cues to continue practicing at home with your child after the completion of the program.**
- **The Readiness Test with ways to interpret your child's score.**

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

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Start Smart Baseball and the contents in this manual are the property of the National Alliance For Youth Sports.  
For additional information, please call 1-800-729-2057.

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### **What is Start Smart Baseball?**

Start Smart Baseball teaches children (ages 3-5) the basic skills necessary to play organized baseball, while they work one-on-one and spend quality time with their parents. The program focuses on teaching children and their parents throwing, catching, batting, and running/agility skills without the threat of competition or the fear of getting hurt. Start Smart Baseball sessions are held one time per week for 6 weeks, and each week the exercises become more difficult as the class progresses and the children show improvement.

### **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 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 and parents to spend quality time together, without the threat of competition or the fear of getting hurt.

## Program Guidelines

These guidelines should be emphasized to ensure that your child obtains high levels of success and achievement during the Start Smart Baseball 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:*** Start Smart activities are organized so that all children are maximally involved and practicing tasks at the same time. To maximize individual practice time, equipment is provided for all of the parent-child groups.
- ***Success is Important:*** The child should experience high success rates on each task or it is probably too difficult and should be modified (i.e. changing the distance that 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” and 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, positive feedback from parents regarding the child’s performance and effort will enhance learning.
- ***Expect Success:*** Children need a lot of encouragement and a feeling that your only expectations are that they learn and improve. If you expect success, your child will have the confidence to believe that he/she is 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 next task.

# Throwing

## Activities and Performance Cues

### Equipment

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

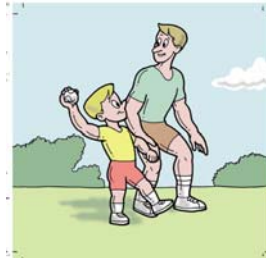
### Skills

- 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 toward target with opposite foot.

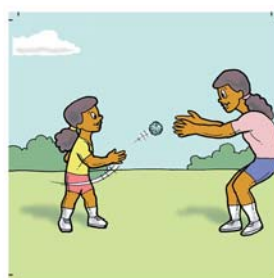


Shoulder first, then elbow, forearm, and hand forward.  
Bellybutton to the target as the child throws.  
Throw as hard as you can!

### Underhand Throw



Face the target.  
Hand and arm way back behind the child's body.  
Big step toward 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

### Equipment

Use an appropriate ball to teach your child how to catch. We recommend and 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. As the children show improvement, encourage them to practice catching by using a small foam ball.

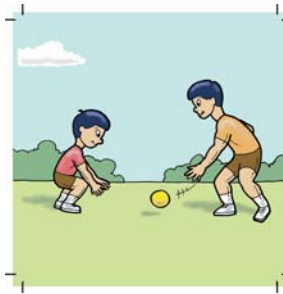
### Skills

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

### 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 hand into your hand or glove.  
Squeeze the ball.  
“Give” with the ball.

# Batting

## Activities and Performance Cues

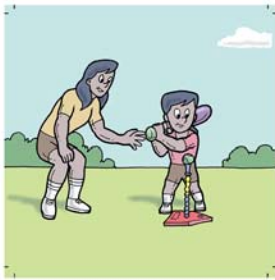
### Equipment

- To begin, use a batting tee to teach your child how to swing a hit a ball. As your child shows improvement, toss the ball to him/her instead of using a tee.

### Skills

- To practice batting from a tee:
  - Hit a ball past a marked line
  - Hit a ball to a designated target.
- To practice batting without a tee, have the child:
  - Hit a ball that is tossed from his/her parent.
  - Hit a ball tossed from the side by a parent.
  - Hit a balloon that was tossed from his/her parent.

### 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.

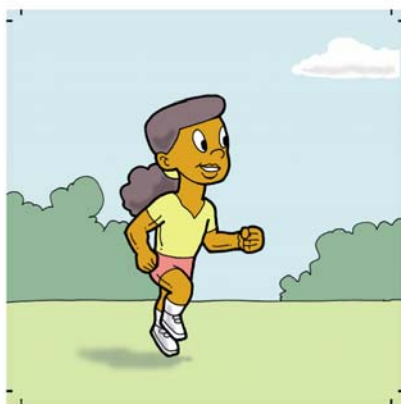
## Running / Agility

### Activities and Performance Cues

#### Skills

- To focus on running and agility, have the child:
  - Run and change directions on a parent's call.
  - Practice sliding back and forth.
  - Combine many skills: the child will change activities between skipping, sliding, walking, running, and the grapevine.

## Running / Agility



- Keep your head up.
- "Lean into" run slightly.
- Lift your knees.
- Bend your elbows and swing your arms freely.
- Run on the balls of your feet.
- Run lightly.

## **Readiness Test Introduction**

### **When are the children tested?**

Children should be tested **prior** to beginning the Start Smart Baseball program and then **after** completing the program to gauge progress.

### **Why are the children tested?**

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

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

Read the directions and set-up for each skill area in this manual. Understand that **the test is NOT used to rank or score any of the children, and the scores are only for you to see, as they will not be collected by the Start Smart Baseball Coordinator.**

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

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

Use the score sheets provided in your manual 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 Test**

### **Throwing Test 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 *Koosh Ball* for this test.

### **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.”

<b>Overhand Throwing Task Components</b>	<b>PreTest</b>	<b>PostTest</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>PreTest</b>	<b>PostTest</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 Test**

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

Mark off 2 lines on the floor (10 feet apart). Have the children stand on one line and the parents stand on the other line. Encourage the parents and children to face each other, and give the parents a *Koosh Ball*.

### **Instructions**

The parent 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	PreTest	PostTest
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.		

## **Batting Test**

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

In an open area, mark off 2 lines (15 feet apart). Participants will need a batting tee, 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	PreTest	PostTest
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.		

## **Running / Agility Test**

### **Running / Agility Test Set Up and Equipment Requirements**

In a large open area, mark off a starting and stopping point 30 feet apart. No equipment is needed.

### **Instructions**

The child will begin at the starting point. At the parent's call, the child will run to the stopping point by either zig zagging, running straight, or curved.

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

"Stand at the starting point. First I will tell you how you will run (zig zagged, straight, or curved) and then I'll say, 'Go.' Run as fast as you can to the finish line."

<b>Running Task Components</b>	<b>PreTest</b>	<b>PostTest</b>
Child keeps his/her head up.		
Child "leans into" run slightly.		
Child lifts his/her knees.		
Child bends elbows and swings arms freely.		
Child runs on the balls of his/her feet.		
Child runs lightly.		

## **Interpreting the Test Scores**

### **Children Learn at Different Rates**

These tests 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 Child's Progress**

As your child proceeds through the Start Smart Baseball 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 your child to other children in the group. Remember that children develop and learn on different timelines. Be patient, and give your child lots of encouragement and opportunities to practice tasks.

Do not rush your child out of this developmental program into a competitive sports program before he/she is 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. Your child may benefit more during this time by experiencing success and will gain confidence in his/her abilities by continuing in the Start Smart Baseball program.

### **Interpreting the Qualitative Assessment Test**

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 tests 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 parent 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 tests), then he/she has met the minimum skills necessary to begin organized sports.



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