BASEBALL RULES FOR NEW PARENTS: A PLAIN-ENGLISH GUIDE

Regulation VI, Little League Baseball Rulebook (2026 edition)

Rules 2-19 and 2-3, NFHS Baseball Rules Book (2026 edition) Last checked Nov 1, 2026 By Julien Levadoux

> **Youth baseball's odd-looking calls come down to a few rules. A balk sends runners up a base, the infield fly makes the batter out even if the ball drops, and a dropped third strike can let the batter run. Pitch counts set how much a pitcher may throw and how long they rest. Which ones apply depends on your child's league and age.**

You've watched plenty of baseball, but youth games still throw up calls that make the bleachers go quiet. Here's what's going on.

FIRST: WHICH RULES IS YOUR CHILD PLAYING?

Youth baseball isn't one rulebook. Most kids play **Little League** or another youth organization (PONY, Babe Ruth/Cal Ripken, USSSA travel ball), and high school teams play **NFHS** rules adapted by their **state association**. The rules below change with the league and the age, so when a call surprises you, the first question is which book the game is played under. Coaches and the league's website can tell you.

THE CALLS THAT CONFUSE PARENTS

The balk. With runners on base, the pitcher can't start a motion and stop, fake a throw to first, or skip coming to a stop before pitching. If they do, every runner moves up a base. With nobody on base the same thing is an "illegal pitch," and the batter gets a ball. In **Little League's Major Division and younger, runners can't lead off, so there are no balks**: an illegal move is just a ball. More in what a balk is.

The infield fly. With runners on first and second (or the bases loaded) and fewer than two outs, the umpire calls an easy infield pop-up an infield fly. **The batter is out even if nobody catches it.** It stops fielders dropping the ball on purpose to turn a double play. Little League uses it in the Major Division and up. See the infield fly rule.

The dropped third strike. If the catcher doesn't catch strike three cleanly, the batter can run to first, but only if first base is empty or there are two outs. Little League uses it in the Major Division and up, not in Minors. See the dropped third strike.

The courtesy runner. Sometimes a player you don't expect runs for the pitcher or catcher, who stays in the game. It saves time while the catcher puts on gear. Whether it's allowed depends on the league and, in high school, the state. See courtesy runners.

PITCH COUNTS

Every youth league and high school association limits how many pitches a player may throw in a day, and how many days of rest they need afterward. Little League, for example, allows 75 pitches a day at league age 9–10 and requires 4 days of rest after 66 or more pitches (age 14 and under). No player may pitch three days in a row. High school limits are set state by state.

If your child pitches, it's worth knowing their limit. The pitch count calculator shows the rest and the next day they can pitch, for Little League and for each state's high school rules.

WHAT THE UMPIRE'S SIGNALS MEAN

- **Strike or out:** right arm raised, then brought down like a hammer.
- **Safe:** both arms swept out to the sides, palms down. The same signal on a third strike that isn't caught means the batter can run.
- **Foul ball or time out:** both hands raised above the head, with a call of "Foul" or "Time".
- **Fair ball:** a point toward fair territory, with no call.
- **Infield fly:** a finger pointing up, with "Infield fly, the batter's out."

HOW THE GAME CHANGES WITH AGE

- **Tee ball and coach pitch** (about ages 4–8): everyone bats, coaches help on the field, and many leagues keep no score.
- **Kid pitch** (about 9–12): walks, strikeouts and pitch counts start. In Little League's Major Division, runners still can't leave a base until the pitch reaches the batter.
- **13 and up:** bigger fields, runners lead off, pitchers have pickoff moves, and balks are called.
- **High school:** seven-inning games under NFHS rules, with each state's pitch count rule.

BEING A GOOD BASEBALL PARENT

The umpire's judgment calls, like ball, strike, safe or out, stand. Coaches, not parents, ask the umpire about a rule. Let the coach coach. Cheer for effort, not just hits. And bring a chair, water and a jacket: youth games run longer than you think. For the words you'll hear in the stands, see baseball terms.



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