

BASIC VOLLEYBALL RULES

There are only 3 touches per side before the ball needs to go over the net.

- As players get older, this will become pass, set, hit (commonly called bump, set, spike at the younger ages).
- Many players believe they need to pass the ball back over the net on the first contact. There will be a drill at the end of this article that focuses on using all three.

No doubles (as soon as a player touches the ball, another player has to touch it before they can touch it again).

- If a player has a bad contact and it ends up close by, they'll often take another swing at it or try to pass it again. This deters other players from going after the ball because they might get hit by the player who made the last contact.
- Emphasize freezing if they make a bad contact. This will allow other players to come in and play the ball without fear.

Do not touch the net.

- Technically, there are more exact rules for when you can and cannot touch the net. This is too much for 5th- and 6th-graders to remember. Just tell them they're not allowed to touch the net to keep life simple (and safer).

Stay on your side of the net.

- Just like touching the net, there are rules about how you can and cannot cross the centerline. Again, just tell them they can't step under the net to make things easy and reduce rolled ankles.

Back row cannot hit in the front row.

- Hitting is fun. And players who *especially* like hitting will sometimes run into the front row from the back row to hit the ball. While there are a ton of technicalities around this rule, we're again going to simplify and say that players who are in the back row can only downball the ball (more on that in the **Skills** section).

POSITIONS, SUBSTITUTIONS, AND PLAYING TIME

6 players on the court at a time.

- You will most likely have 10 players or more on your team. Everyone will have to sit out at some point, and probably for half of the game. That's just how volleyball works. Explain this to them so you have *fewer* pouty lips on the sideline.
- Warning: there will still be some players who get mad when they're out! And they'll probably cross their arms and complain that it's not fair that they have to sit out, even if playing time is equal. You've been warned :).

I do not recommend using a libero (unless you're playing club volleyball).

- Most players are not specialized enough in 5th- and 6th-grade to have a true libero identified. Even though it would be fun to mix it up and have players experience playing libero, I'd save that for advanced teams or club teams who are a few months into the season.

Play the position they rotate into.

- One of my biggest mistakes coaching 5th-graders in the past was expecting them to understand positions. 6th-graders during long seasons may be able to figure out positions, but 5th-grade (especially beginner players) should just play the position they rotate into.
- Having your players set when they rotate into middle front is easiest, but having them set from right front is more like the game they'll learn as they get older.
- If you have complete beginners, set from middle front. For intermediate volleyball teams, try setting from right front.
- Have a more experienced team or playing club? Learn how to run a [6-2](#) (preferred) or [5-1](#)!

Make substitutions when players rotate into front row or back row.

- Playing time is most commonly determined by when a player is in front row or back row. Before the game, designate players who will play front row or back row and tell them who they are subbing in for. Example: "Kayla will play front row, and as she's rotating into back row Jennifer will sub in."

- You can make substitutions any time you want, but this is what is standard at all levels of volleyball.
- Players who only play front row will sub out right before they serve. This often results in hurt feelings (all players want to serve) so I would mix up who plays front row and back row on occasion.
- Substitutions are typically made when your team wins a rally and rotates, not when you lose a rally and are in the middle of a rotation (again, you can sub at any time, but this is what's "normal").

SKILLS

Serving

- All rallies start with a serve, and being able to get the ball over to start a rally is critical.
- Underhand and overhand serving are both acceptable at these ages (club will be primarily overhand).
- Overhand serving will be expected by 7th grade, so start to teach your players the overhand serve when you feel they are ready.
- Many 5th graders are able to serve overhand if taught the proper mechanics and given time.
- "Over and in" is more important than a tough serve.
- Underhand serve: "Rock and pop" are my cue words.
- Overhand serve: "Toss and high five" are my cue words.

Passing

- Passing and keeping the ball on your side of the net is one of the toughest concepts to teach (more on that later)
- Teach players to get behind the ball and stay hunched over as they are passing. Swinging at the ball only causes shanks (which is volleyball speak for "bad pass that no one else can touch").
- Teach players to move in all directions to pass the ball. Start with teaching side to side movement, then running forward to pass the ball, and finally how to pass the ball after moving backward.
- Do NOT always toss the ball nicely to players in practice. The ball rarely, if ever, comes to them nicely in a game. The results may not be pretty in practice, but when you get in a game situation you'll see that your team is likely much more prepared than your opponent.

- Practice serve receive (passing the ball after it's been served) since this will be the most common passing contact younger players have on the ball.

Setting

- Setting as a setter is rare at the younger ages. The setting motion can also be called “overhand passing” and can be used at other times in a match than just setting an attacker for a hit.
- Teach setting/overhand passing as an alternative to backpedaling and passing the ball. This often results in a better contact and keeps the ball in play longer.
- When teaching setting in the context of setting the ball so it can be hit, teach to set “[down the alley](#)” instead of setting to a person. This is like in football, you throw the ball where the receiver is *going* to be, not where they actually are when you release the ball.

Hitting

- Hitting in the front row is complicated, but often players like hitting so much that they will practice their footwork and armswing at home (making your job easier at practice).
- Start by teaching how to downball the ball (forget about the full approach footwork, just work on the last two steps and contacting the ball at the right time, no jumping involved).
- Once players are ready, teach a 4-step approach. This is what will benefit them the most at higher levels.
- Teach your team to downball the ball from the back row as well! This reduces the number of times the ball drops and gets *big* cheers from the crowd.

Jousting

- After your team has been practicing a while, you'll notice that when the ball is close to the net they'll often just... stare and let it drop. Teaching your players to joust (regardless of height) will help you win more points because they'll know what to do when the ball is close to the net. You may even get some inadvertent blocks out of this training!

CONCEPTS

Serve and then run into defense

- Players will often serve... and then watch their serve. And since the easiest contact on the ball often results in it returning right back to where it came from, this usually ends up in a point and sideout for the other team!
- Practice serving and then running onto the court and getting into ready position. Bonus points if you then throw a ball to that player and have them pass immediately after.

Understanding who is responsible for what area of the court when passing (2-step rule)

- Balls drop all the time because it lands in between two players or, worse yet, right next to someone.
- Since you will probably be running a very basic defense at this age, I like to teach my players that any ball within two steps of them is theirs. This is more concrete to them than telling them it's theirs if it's "in their zone."
- Make the best use out of your most aggressive players and put them next to players who don't move much to start out. This will result in less dropped balls to start your season. As time goes on, expand the responsibilities for your more timid players.

Setter chases down second ball

- Since you're probably having everyone set at this age, it can be hard for player to get into a "setter" mindset.
- Teach players that when they are the setter, the second ball is theirs. When they rotate into setter position, have them say it out loud (both as a reminder to them and for their teammates).
- Some teams let their setters call "help" if they can't get to the second ball, and then a teammate is supposed to step in and pass or set the ball. This can be confusing, so only use this if your team has more experience. Otherwise, institute a "no help" policy. There will be dropped balls, but that will motivate your team to pass better.
- Practice having your players set from different spots on the court, and practice running there, too! This will help them feel more confident come game time.

Hitters prepare to hit while setter is getting the ball

- Just like setters forget to chase down the second ball, hitters forget that their turn to touch the ball is coming up next!
- This will be one of the hardest concepts to teach new players, since getting a true “pass-set-hit” sequence is pretty rare at this age.
- Teach your hitters to recognize that a set is coming (and could come from different angles) by running hitting lines with your team, but have your tosses go to different spots on the court. They will start to recognize who the ball is going to based on where the pass is, helping them prepare to hit.

Back to defense mindset after ball goes over

- Alright, you sent the ball over! Time to watch it and see if the other team messes up, right? No!
- Players should learn to “reset” after the ball goes back over and get to their “base” position on the court. More advanced teams might have true positions that they run to, but younger teams just need to get back to their zone on the court.
- Incorporate moving into base by practicing this movement *every* time your team sends the ball back over the net in as many drills as you can.

Front row jousting for a tight ball

- Coaches eyes light up when a tall player walks into their gym for tryouts. You’ll surely win all your matches with someone who can reach over the net without even jumping! However, you need to teach this player (and all others) what to do at the net (instead of assuming they’ll naturally know what to do).
- When the ball is tight to the net and you’re not sure what side it’ll come down on, many players will just stand back and watch.
- Teach your players to jump up to meet the ball, and you’ll likely win 70% or more of these balls (until the other teams figure this out, too).

DRILLS

Knowing what skills to teach is one thing... but having drills to teach them is another! I've put together a brief list of some of my *favorite* drills to run with this age group, but many of the drills here on Get The Pancake will work, too.

- **Dead Fish**
- **Hitting Survivor**
- **Shuttle Passing**
- **Jousting Group Work**
- **1 Touch, 2 Touch, 3 Touch, Columbus**
- **Queen of the Court**