

Coaching Youth Basketball: Focusing on the Fundamentals

- By [Jeff Haefner \(/jeffhaefner.html\)](/jeffhaefner.html)

The fundamentals of basketball are the foundation for every individual play, offensive or defensive strategy, and every move that your players make. The best players have perfected the basics of the game. Learning and mastering these basics make the rest of the game much easier!

My number one recommendation when coaching youth basketball is to focus on the fundamentals!

Spend at least 75% of each practice on them.

Do NOT teach your youth team how to do a full court press!

First teach them how execute offense and defense in the half court. Even if you think they know how to execute in the half court, I guarantee they don't...

Do all your players know how to read screens? Do they slip the screen when the defense hedges on the pick and roll? Do they set screens shoulder to shoulder? Do they block out after every shot? Do they always see their man and the ball when they're on defense?

If they don't know how to do these things, why in the world would you teach them how to do a full court press?

In 20 years of watching basketball, I've NEVER seen a youth team that was ready to press and had all the fundamentals down pact!

If you make teaching your players the fundamentals your number one goal, your players will enjoy practice, they will appreciate their improvement, and they will be grateful down the road.

Like any sport, no matter what your age -- whether you're a professional athlete or a youth player just getting started -- you need strong fundamentals to be successful!

Unfortunately, most people don't really understand what that means.

So what are the fundamentals?

The fundamentals include working on the little things that will make you better -- no matter what team or coach you play for -- or what offense or defense you are running.

For example, by working on the [fundamentals of shooting \(/fundamentals/shooting-technique.html\)](/fundamentals/shooting-technique.html), you will get better no matter what offense you run. The fundamentals of shooting include proper foot alignment, leg bend, hand position, arm angle, follow through, and so on. These are some of the little things that make a difference. Learn them!

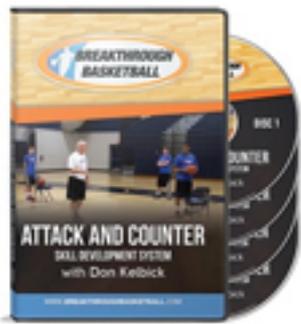
The same goes for lays ups, foot work, post play, passing, jab steps, jump stops, pivoting, blocking out, and so on.

For youth players, we suggest that you focus on teaching the proper technique and fundamentals for:

- [Lay ups \(/fundamentals/layups.html\)](/fundamentals/layups.html)
- [Shooting \(/fundamentals/shooting.html\)](/fundamentals/shooting.html)
- [Foul Shooting \(/fundamentals/foulshooting.html\)](/fundamentals/foulshooting.html)
- [Passing \(/fundamentals/passing.html\)](/fundamentals/passing.html)
- [Dribbling and ballhandling \(/fundamentals/ballhandling.html\)](/fundamentals/ballhandling.html)
- [Jump stops \(/drills/jumpstops.html\)](/drills/jumpstops.html)
- [Triple threat position \(/fundamentals/individual_offense.html\)](/fundamentals/individual_offense.html) and pivoting
- [Jab steps \(/fundamentals/individual_offense.html\)](/fundamentals/individual_offense.html)
- [Basic screening \(/articles/basic-basketball-screens.html\)](/articles/basic-basketball-screens.html) and cutting
- [Defense \(/fundamentals/mandefense.html\)](/fundamentals/mandefense.html)
- [Rebounding \(/fundamentals/rebounding.html\)](/fundamentals/rebounding.html)
- [Basic post moves \(/fundamentals/postplay.html\)](/fundamentals/postplay.html)

These are all critical fundamentals to master because they'll make you and your team better, no matter what age level or situation you might be in.

Recommended DVD's & eBook:



[The Attack & Counter Skill Development System \(/pr/attackandcounter.html\)](/pr/attackandcounter.html)

This eBook & DVD's will improve your shooting, ballhandling, footwork, perimeter moves, post moves, finishing, aggressiveness, quickness, confidence, mentality, and your all-around game!

Designed by NBA skills coach Don Kelbick, this unique and comprehensive system is incredibly simple when compared to other skill development programs. Yet it works with NBA and pro players at the highest level... ([more info](#)

[\(/pr/attackandcounter.html\)](/pr/attackandcounter.html)
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Al Lively says:

10/13/2007 at 10:44:53 AM

I agree,too ,much too soon is not good.

Get a firm foundation in fundamentals to build on.

Some good free video clips of this.

<http://www.coachesclipboard.net/VideoClips.html> (<http://www.coachesclipboard.net/VideoClips.html>)

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Tim says:

10/31/2007 at 2:16:23 PM

You are so right about the importance of fundamentals. I read awhile back that the number of international players in the NBA is increasing every year because of just this. NBA coaches acknowledged that they are more skilled in the fundamentals and better team players than the American players. I have to agree.

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Michelle says:

11/13/2007 at 10:33:26 AM

OK That just answered my earlier question about full court press....see your point, back to the half court defense it is!

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Dan Roser says:

12/11/2007 at 6:25:14 PM

great website.....I never see or hear about the importance of pivoting in teaching books and websites, but feel it to be extremely important in all phases of the game. Also the team I coach (5th grade boys) has a wide range of talent and this makes teaching a bit confusing. Some are so far ahead of others any suggestions?

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Ernie says:

1/16/2008 at 2:11:51 PM

This is a great website. Thank you for all the basic info. I'm a rookie youth coach (3rd grade boys) and this is just the sort of help I need.

I'm going to read through your e-books. I am looking for an extremely basic offense for my boys. About a 3rd of them are playing basketball for the first time.

Any suggestions are much appreciated.

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Joe (Co-founder of Breakthrough Basketball) says:

1/16/2008 at 2:14:41 PM

Hi Ernie,

We answered a question similar to this at this link: <http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/qa/q7-youth-offense.html> (<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/qa/q7-youth-offense.html>)

It refers to 11 year olds, but the same principles apply to younger ages as well.

Joe

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Gabriel says:

9/2/2008 at 6:48:19 AM

How long could take a fundamentals teaching for young players (in terms of months)? Thanks

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Joe Haefner says:

9/2/2008 at 7:45:13 AM

Hi Gabriel,

I don't think you can put a number on how long it will take to teach fundamentals. It depends on the age level, skill level, and what you're trying to teach. Coaching is an art form and part of that is recognizing when it's time to progress to a new skill with a higher level of difficulty.

When teaching fundamentals, that never stops. Youth coaches to Pro coaches all emphasize fundamentals.

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Brian Morgan says:

10/21/2009 at 1:12:54 PM

I'm a 7th & 8th grade girls coach and totally agree with you on teaching fundamentals at this age. 75% of my practices are focused on skill building. Unfortunately, the 5 & 6th grade coaches at the school don't. Their practices consist of goofing off and scrimmaging. You know the old "kids this age don't have long attention spans" and "just getting them in the gym is enough at this age" In fact they criticize me for not scrimmaging enough. I feel like I should approach them about the lack of fundamentals and that is going to hurt the kids' development in the long run. I don't want to start a fight but its hard to stand by and see the kids being cheated. Any advice on how to handle this situation? Thanks

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Jeff Haefner says:

10/23/2009 at 7:11:19 AM

Brian - Your question was posted on our forum and has received some good responses:

<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=55&t=96>
(<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=55&t=96>)

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Eric says:

1/7/2010 at 4:54:08 AM

I agree with the theme of the article, which is teach fundamentals first, teach them 75% of practice, and save full court press for later. Well said in that regard.

However I do not agree with the statement "Do NOT teach them full court press."

Why would you purposely not teach them any aspect of the game?

Pressing is a part of the game. You will teach them press-break of course in case the other team presses... they deserve to know how to run a decent press also.

Even if it is not used every game or the whole game, this is part of at least introducing to them the experiences they will build on later.

I coach a middle school team that is very talented but also very short. We play a lot of teams with guys that look 3-4 years older than ours. If we sat back in a half-court set we would get demolished on the boards, regardless of how much I drill boxing out. We win because we use our quickness and the defensive training that I stress (huge part of fundamentals) to pressure the ball and create turnovers.

Thank you for a good article about fundamentals and for letting me share my point of view.

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Joe Haefner says:

1/26/2010 at 5:39:22 PM

Hi Eric,

You bring up some good points there. The problem really lies with youth basketball teams that don't focus on the fundamentals and all they do is press. They use a ploy that takes advantage of players being weaker, smaller, and not able to mentally process things quick enough to break the press. In essence, it's a swarm the ball defense that would never work at the higher levels of basketball. Personally, I don't believe in organized pressing before high school. I think for the long-term development of the players it's best to work on the fundamentals and concepts that will help more when they are older.

However, if you want to extend your man to man defense and pressure the ball at the middle school level, I don't think that's a big deal.

This discussion is further discussed at this page: <http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/defense/age.html>
(<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/defense/age.html>)

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Eleanor Hughes says:

8/30/2012 at 9:45:32 PM

Hi,

I am in charge of a basketball "club" at an elementary. We don't have funding so it's just 10 kids (grades 3-6) for 1 hour a week. We will not play formal games against other teams. I have looked over your explanations about the basics - thanks! Is there anywhere I can find fun games or drills that get all kids involved and appeal to kids of different ability levels?

I really just want them to have fun and feel good about school and themselves.

Thanks!

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Jeff Haefner says:

8/31/2012 at 7:47:48 AM

Eleanor - It sounds like this is exactly what you're looking for:

<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/pr/fun-youth-drills.html> (<http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/pr/fun-youth-drills.html>)

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Jeff says:

2/24/2013 at 9:24:32 PM

Dear Jeff;Yes,starting coaching a YMCA league of 11-13 yr olds of girls and boys mixed,actually only 2 girls on my have team including my daughter.We have played 3 games and lost all although they were close games.We have only 1 day of practice a week and games on Sat.I have a total of ten kids but usually have 8 or 9 who show up on sat,and we play half of a full court.I""m wondering if I should teach some easy plays or just continue teaching them the fundamentals,some of my kids can dribble and some lack the skill.There are alot of turnovers and the refs are not reliable with the calls.Other coaches seem to have plays but seem to be only out of bounds plays.Alot of the kids are like my daughter,they play in a middle school team or travel team and don""t get playing time.Any suggestions.Thanks

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Jeff says:

2/24/2013 at 9:34:47 PM

Hi,Still have more questions on coaching 11-13 yr olds at YMCA league.All kids get to play,we have to sub every 4 mins.I have two kids that can handle the ball pretty good,but i split them up so one of them can bring the ball up when I sub forn them.I have a 1hr practice once a wk.Like to give them some kind of motion offense to try,but don't know if some of them would help them,been mostly working on screens and pick and rolls because it's mostly play ground basketball out there.Is it worth any practice time to work on a out of bounds play or set play,or stay with the fundamentals.Thank you

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Ken Sartini says:

2/25/2013 at 8:42:42 AM

Keep working on the fundamentals... they need to be able to pass and catch on the move and they need to be able to dribble.

You could run a 5 out open post offense, pass and cut to the basket.... everyone rotates and fills spots.

You need one simple inbound play.... a line (4)

1&2 cut opposite..... 3 steps up and 4 steps back for a release pass.

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Jeff Haefner says:

2/25/2013 at 7:25:54 PM

Jeff - I agree with Ken. I would not spend time trying to get them to memorize plays. Teach them fundamentals and run a motion.

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Precious says:

8/4/2014 at 2:26:15 PM

Hi, I have a 8 yr old sister I've been working with for 3 years now and she cant seem to grip the concept of how to do a lay up. She knows how to go towards the basket but ends up taking a very close jump shot. What do u recommend I do to get her to get better?

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Ken Sartini says:

8/4/2014 at 4:14:30 PM

Precious -

I coached sophomore and varsity boys for for over 40+ years and taught the step and a half lay up, pretty standard.

In my last year I worked with girls and found that a jump stop lay up was more effective. I even found some boys teens doing this after awhile...You might try that.

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CGR says:

11/3/2014 at 9:34:15 AM

Yes Ken I also find the jump-stop layup (in effect a short jump shot off the backboard) is a great way to introduce layups.

Footwork at that age is a major stumbling block, and even with repeated practice in a mini-game setting the footwork evaporates, the kids are excited, etc.

Kids have to first wrap their heard - and bodies - around the concept of going off the board. Wall shooting helps this.

For layups we do a lot of stationary balance drills that seem to help.

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Darren D. says:

2/28/2016 at 11:52:55 AM

I have recently become the basketball coach at a small private school. There is talent there but no fundamentals, the last coach was a Soccer coach.

I love the game, and I have some knowledge. But I have never coached or played organize ball. I would like to know if there are any websites discussions or links that I can use to help me with their fundamentals, or for me and my coaching as well.

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