First Youth Basketball Practice: A Minute-by-Minute Plan

8-14 | Practice Plans | Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

The gym door opens at 6:00. The team before you is still running a scrimmage, there are eleven kids and four parents bunched up by the bleachers, and you have exactly one hour of court time, half of a bag of balls, and a printed roster with two names you can't pronounce yet. That's the real first practice of a rec or school basketball season. It's rarely the clean scenario the sample plans picture.

Here's the short answer: run a 60-minute first practice that is roughly 70% moving with a ball and 30% talking. Open with a ball in every kid's hands, teach three things only (the triple-threat stance, a jump stop, and basic player-to-player defense), and finish with a small-sided game so every player touches the ball dozens of times. Skip plays, zones, and long lectures. Your job on day one is to learn names, see who can do what, and send every kid home wanting to come back.

Below is the exact plan we run, the age adjustments, the parent message we send before day one, and the one thing nobody else's first-practice plan tells you to do.

What the First Practice Actually Needs to Accomplish

Most first-practice advice boils down to "set the tone" and "teach the basics." True, but vague. We give the first session four specific jobs:

1. **Learn every name.** Use each kid's name at least three times before they leave.
2. **Quietly sort the roster.** By minute 45 you should know who can dribble with their weak hand, who can catch a pass on the move, and who flinches when someone gets close. That shapes the next six practices.
3. **Install your two non-negotiables.** Ours are "ball on the floor when the coach talks" and "sprint to the huddle." Two rules, said once, enforced kindly all season.
4. **Get a win.** Every player should do something successful that they can tell their parents about in the car.

If you're new to coaching the sport entirely, read our guide on how to coach youth basketball for the first time first. It covers the league-rules homework and parent meeting that sit underneath this plan.

Before Day One: The Parent Message

Send this two to three days before the first practice. It heads off the "where do we park, what does she wear, does he need his own ball" texts you'd otherwise field while kids run wild.

Subject: First practice — [Team name], [Day/Date]

Hi families! I'm [Coach name], and I'm excited to coach your kids this season.

First practice: [Day, date, time] at [gym name and which court/door]. **Please arrive** 10 minutes early. We start on time because our gym slot is short. **Bring:** basketball shoes (non-marking, worn only indoors if possible), a full water bottle, and a ball if you have one — size [27.5 / 28.5 / 29.5]. **Pickup:** please be at the door at [end time]. The next team needs the court.

At this first practice we'll learn names, work on basics, and play a lot. There's no evaluation and no pressure. If your player has any medical needs I should know about, please reply to this message.

See you on the court!

Not sure which ball size to list? Our youth basketball size by age guide has the chart.

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The 60-Minute First Practice Plan

This plan assumes one coach (two is better), one half or full court, and 8 to 12 players. Times are written as minutes from the start of your slot.

0:00–0:08 — Arrival Dribble (8 min) Every player grabs a ball the second they walk in, no standing around. They dribble anywhere on your half of the court while you walk around learning names. Call out simple commands every 20 seconds: "Right hand! Left hand! Freeze!" On "freeze," they jump stop and hold the ball. This is your first look at who has handled a ball before. Coaching cue: "Eyes up. Find me, not the ball."

0:08–0:12 — Huddle and Two Rules (4 min) Bring them in, balls on the floor between their feet. Say your name, have each player say their name and their favorite food, then state your two rules. Keep it under four minutes or you lose them. Coaching cue: "When I talk, the ball sleeps on the floor."

0:12–0:20 — Movement Warm-Up Without the Ball (8 min) Two lines on the baseline. Go to half-court and back: high knees, skips for height, side shuffles, backpedal, then two "stop on a whistle" sprints. This builds the deceleration and change of direction that protect knees and ankles, and it's straight athletic development rather than basketball-specific. Coaching cue: "Stop in two steps, chest up, butt down."

0:20–0:28 — Jump Stop and Triple Threat (8 min) Players dribble from the baseline toward a cone line. At the cone, they pick up the ball with a two-foot jump stop, then rip into triple threat: knees bent, ball on the hip of their shooting side, eyes on the rim. Add a pivot: three front pivots, three reverse pivots, without moving the pivot foot. Coaching cue: "Land on two feet, quiet like a cat, ball on your hip."

0:28–0:36 — Partner Passing Lines (8 min) Pairs facing each other about 10 feet apart. Ten chest passes, ten bounce passes, then the receiver must show a target hand and call their partner's name before the pass comes. Step back a big step every round. Watch who catches with fingers spread and who catches with their chest. Coaching cue: "Thumbs down on the follow-through. Call a name, then pass."

0:36–0:44 — Defensive Stance and Mirror (8 min) Teach the stance once: feet wider than shoulders, hands active, slide without crossing feet. Then partners play mirror: one player shuffles side to side in a lane-width space, the defender stays in front. Switch every 20 seconds. This is your first look at player-to-player defense, and it's the only defense we teach on day one. Coaching cue: "Nose on their belly button. Slide, don't cross."

0:44–0:56 — 3-on-3 Small-Sided Games (12 min) Split into teams of three, play to two baskets on one court if you can (or one basket with "make it, take it back"). Rules: every player must touch the ball before a shot, and jump stops count as a "point" when you call them out. Rotate teams every three minutes. Three-on-three gives every player roughly twice the touches of five-on-five. Coaching cue: "Pass and move. Nobody stands still."

0:56–1:00 — Close and Shoutout (4 min) Everyone sprints to the huddle (that's rule two in action). Give one specific shoutout per two players, for example "Maya, your jump stops were the quietest in the gym." Preview next practice in one sentence, do a team break, and walk them to the door so the next team can start on time. Coaching cue: "Same energy Thursday."

Adjusting the Plan by Age

The structure above stays the same; what changes is the content inside each block.

- **8U and younger:** Cut the passing block to 5 minutes and add a dribble-tag game. Use a lowered rim (8 feet) and a size 27.5 ball if your gym allows. Keep huddles under 2 minutes. Our 8U basketball practice plan explains why the 10-foot rim backfires

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- **12U–14U:** Add a 5-minute layup line (right side, then left side) after the warm-up and shorten the mirror drill. Older players can handle a short "team identity" conversation in the opening huddle. For what comes after week one, our 12U basketball practice plan picks up from here.

What to Skip on Day One

The fastest way to wreck a first practice is trying to install the whole season in an hour. Leave these out:

- **Plays and set offenses.** Kids who can't jump stop yet can't run a give-and-go reliably. Teach spacing and passing first; plays come weeks later.
- **Zone defense.** USA Basketball's youth guidelines recommend player-to-player defense for younger age groups, with zone introduced around 12U, and many rec leagues ban zones outright below that. Check your league rules, but even where zone is legal, a day-one zone hides the kids who need defensive reps most.
- **Laps and suicides as conditioning.** You get better conditioning from 12 minutes of 3-on-3 than from 12 minutes of running, and kids actually want to come back.
- **Long lines.** If more than three kids are waiting for one ball, split the drill or add a station.

The Step Most First-Practice Plans Miss: The Clipboard Notes

Here's the gap we see in almost every first-practice plan we've read: it tells you what to run but not what to *watch*. The first session is the only time you'll see every kid before they've learned your drills, which makes it your most honest evaluation of the season.

I keep three columns on my clipboard during that first hour:

1. **Weak hand:** Can they dribble 5 times with their non-dominant hand without looking? (Yes / sort of / no)
2. **Catch on the move:** In the passing lines, do they catch with hands out and fingers spread, or trap it against their chest?
3. **Contact comfort:** In the mirror drill and 3-on-3, do they step toward the action or drift to the corner?

Last season this exact list told me that more than half our 10U team couldn't catch a bounce pass cleanly. I had planned to spend week two on shooting. We spent it on catching instead, and by our first game the turnovers on simple passes had mostly disappeared. Without the notes, I'd have blamed the shooting for the losses and drilled the wrong thing.

Fold those three columns into the next three practices. The weak-hand kids get extra reps from our youth basketball ball-handling drills, and the corner-drifters get small-sided games where they're forced to touch the ball.

After the First Practice

Within 24 hours, send parents a two-line follow-up: one thing the team did well and the next practice time. It takes two minutes and it sets the tone for how you communicate all season. If you want a full season-opening letter, our parent communication letter template is ready to copy.

From there, move into a repeatable weekly structure. Our beginner basketball practice plan gives you the 90-minute version once the season settles in, and you'll find age-specific plans and drills on our basketball coaching hub.

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