

Youth Basketball Shooting Form Drills: 6 Progressions

Drills

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Last season I had a 10-year-old point guard who could split a full-court press without looking at the ball. His handle was already there. His shooting form was not — he sprayed shots off the right side of the rim on almost every attempt, his elbow kicked out on release, and he had developed a backward lean to manufacture arc. We spent two weeks on these six drills in order, starting three feet from the basket. By week three he was our most consistent finisher at the mid-range. Not because we changed his shot. Because we rebuilt it one piece at a time.

The most effective youth basketball shooting form drills start close to the basket (3–5 feet), isolate one mechanic at a time, and give players one specific cue per session — not five. For ages 9–13, fix elbow alignment and pre-catch hand position before adding range. Everything else is downstream from those two.

This article walks through the six-drill progression we run in order, plus the single cue that has moved more players faster than anything else we have tried. Pair these with our youth basketball ball handling drills to run a complete skill block in under an hour.

Why Young Players Develop Broken Form in the First Place

The root cause is almost always the same: they are shooting from too far away before they have earned the right to that distance. In our experience the most common mechanical error in 8-to-12-year-old players is elbow flare caused by shooting from beyond their strength range. A 10-year-old heaving a full-size ball at a 10-foot rim from the wing has no choice but to compensate: lower the elbow, use both hands to push, lean back for arc. Those compensations feel normal after a few months. By 13 they are fixable but not easy.

What we see on day one of every basketball camp we run:

- **Elbow chicken-wing:** shooting arm elbow flares out instead of tracking under the ball
- **Guide-hand push:** the off hand wraps and pushes rather than resting on the side as a shelf
- **No legs:** the shot lives entirely in the arms — no hip load, ball dies at range
- **Catch chaos:** ball lands at the hip before the player reorganizes into the shooting pocket, adding a different reorganization move every rep

Each drill below directly targets one of these. Run them in order — this is a progression, not a menu to pick from.

Equipment Adjustments Before You Start

For **ages 9–11:** use a 28.5" ball and, if your gym allows it, an 8-foot rim. Teaching proper form on regulation height with a full-size ball at this age is like teaching a swim stroke in water where the athlete cannot touch the bottom. If rims are fixed at 10 feet, work closer to the basket and expect a steeper arc angle — that is fine, the mechanics are the same.

For **ages 12–13:** regulation ball and rim. The drills are identical, the distances expand.

The 6-Drill Progression

Drill 1 — One-Hand Wall Shooting (5 min) Stand 2–3 feet from a flat wall, shooting hand only, no ball to start. Practice the

the ball once the motion is clean — the goal is to catch it on the wall at eye level on the return, not at the waist. This drill removes the guide hand entirely so players feel what a clean shooting-hand release actually is before adding any other variable. Coaching cue: "Elbow to the wall. If the elbow drifts, the shot drifts."

Drill 2 — Backboard Form Shooting (8 min) Move to 3 feet directly in front of the backboard, still shooting-hand only. Shoot softly at the backboard — the goal is a straight-line release and a ball that bounces directly back. If the ball bounces sideways, something leaked: usually the elbow or a wrist torque. Ten reps with no make-miss tracking. This is a diagnostic drill as much as a training one — you can read the release path immediately by where the ball returns. If it comes back right of center on a right-handed shooter, the elbow went right. Coaching cue: "If the ball bounces back crooked, your elbow was crooked."

Drill 3 — 5-Foot Form Makes (8–10 min) Move in front of the rim at 5 feet. Now introduce the guide hand. Spend 2 minutes just teaching the shelf position before adding any shooting: ball rests entirely on the shooting hand, guide hand is flat on the side of the ball, elbow of the guide arm points out — NOT wrapped behind the ball. Shoot 5 in a row from 5 feet before stepping back to 7 feet. If they miss three in a row, they are not ready for 7 feet regardless of how much time is left. Range is earned. I say the same thing every year and the players remember it. Coaching cue: "Guide hand is a shelf. A shelf does not push anything."

Drill 4 — Catch-and-Shoot Readiness (10 min) This is the drill almost nobody runs, and it may be the single biggest form-killer in rec basketball. Most players catch the ball at the hip or stomach, then reorganize up into the shooting pocket before shooting. That reorganization motion is slightly different every rep — so even when the release itself is clean, consistency never builds. The fix is simple: before the pass arrives, hands are already up at the shooting pocket. Catch it where you are going to shoot it, shoot in one motion. Run as a partner drill: passer at the elbow, shooter at the block 8 feet away. Player shows hands before the pass leaves the passer's hands. Catch. Shoot. 10 reps each side. Coaching cue: "Hands up before the ball gets there. Catch it where you are going to shoot it."

Drill 5 — Spot Shooting with Range Progression (12 min) Place cones at 5 spots: two blocks (closest to the basket), two elbows, top of the key. Player starts at one block, catches a partner pass, and shoots. Track percentage at each spot for one full round. Block shots should be near 100 percent — if they are not, go back to Drill 3. Elbow shots at 60–70 percent is solid for a 10-year-old still building form. Top of the key is earned last. After one round, move back one step at each spot. The rule: if they drop below 40 percent at a spot for two consecutive rounds, the cone moves in. This keeps them in their real range and stops the habit of bombing shots from distance just because that looks right on television. Coaching cue: "Make the block. Earn the elbow. Earn the top."

Drill 6 — 1-Dribble Pull-Up (10 min, ages 11 and up) Same 5 spots. This time the player starts 3 feet behind the cone, takes one dribble, gathers, and pulls up. This drill connects ball handling to shooting form and immediately exposes players who have never used their legs in a shot — the pull-up goes flat, every time, if the legs do not load on the gather. Slow the dribble all the way down until the gather is clean, then add speed in stages. If there is a stutter step before the gather, walk through the footwork at half speed before adding the dribble back. Speed is always the last variable you add. Coaching cue: "The dribble is your loading mechanism. Load it before you shoot."

The One Cue That Moves Players Faster Than Any Drill

After years of coaching youth players, the single most effective shooting cue I have found for players ages 9–13 is this: **"Elbow to the target."**

Not "follow through." Not "get arc." Not "flick your wrist." Those are outputs — they describe what a good shot looks like after the ball has already left the hand. The shooting-arm elbow pointing directly at the rim at the moment of release is the *input* — it aligns the shooting plane, controls guide-hand interference, and produces a clean follow-through as a natural byproduct. When a player starts spraying sideways, I stop them and ask one question: "Where did your elbow go?" They identify it themselves within two reps.

This is the gap in most online shooting resources. They describe the finished product without giving coaches a single adjustable input cue. "Elbow to the target" is that cue. Write it on a whiteboard, say it before every rep in Drills 2 and 3, and watch what happens.

Fitting This Into a Full Practice

These six drills run back to back in 45–50 minutes. In our beginner basketball practice plan, we use Drills 1–3 as the opening skill segment and Drills 4–6 as the main shooting block once players have the foundation. Once Drill 4 is established, it carries directly into game situations — players coming off screens with their hands already up instead of catching low and reorganizing.

If you are coaching players on the younger end, our basketball drills guide for kids ages 6–8 has the movement and coordination work that builds the athletic base before form shooting makes sense. We do not introduce form work before age 8 in our program — the body control is not there yet. Motor coordination first, mechanics second.

Three Questions We Hear Every Season

What age should I start teaching shooting form? Once a player can reliably receive and hold a chest pass — typically around age 8–9 — they are ready for Drills 1–3. Before that, let them shoot, play, and enjoy the game. Movement and coordination first.

How long before form sticks in games? Players who run Drills 1–4 consistently for two to three weeks show visible improvement in form during practice. Game-speed consistency takes four to six weeks of regular reps. Expect regression in games early on — that is normal. The new pattern is still fragile under pressure. Stay patient and stay consistent.

Do you correct shooting form during games? We do not. Form corrections happen in practice. A mid-game correction breaks confidence and has no processing time. Write down what you see in the game, address it at the next practice with the relevant drill. The game is for competing; practice is for fixing.
