THE TALKING SPLIT LIBRARY · FULL GUIDE

COACHING UNDER-12S: THE COMPLETE GUIDE

The whole under-12 guide in one place: the goals, the full curriculum, what not to teach, a sample session, game-day coaching, managing parents, team culture and a one-page quick reference. The overview has the short version.

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WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

Under-12 basketball is where most coaching careers begin. It is also the age group that receives the least specific guidance: courses are generic, advice is often recycled from senior-level coaching, and the particular challenges of coaching nine-to-twelve-year-olds (attention spans, physical literacy gaps, parental anxiety, and the foundational importance of getting it right) are rarely addressed directly.

Across nine seasons of the Talking Split podcast, the hosts and their guests returned to under-12 basketball repeatedly, not as a sidebar to more 'important' conversations about state and national programs, but as the foundation everything else rests on. Rob Calder coached under-12s himself while hosting the podcast, and the directness of his observations about what works and what doesn't at that level gives this guide its practical credibility.

> *"Under-12s have a responsibility to make sure those kids want to come back. First and foremost."*
>
> Zoe Carr, Season 6

This guide compiles everything the podcast said specifically about coaching under-12s, extracted, organised, and framed for coaches who are about to walk into a gym on a weekend with ten nine-to-twelve-year-olds and no idea whether they're doing it right.

You are probably doing more right than you think. And there are a few things almost every under-12 coach does that are worth stopping.

WHAT THIS AGE GROUP ACTUALLY NEEDS

Starting with the right goals

Before any session plan, drill, or offensive system, you need to be honest with yourself about what under-12 athletes actually need from basketball. The podcast was clear on this, and the answer is simpler than most

coaches make it.

GOAL #1: THEY WANT TO COME BACK NEXT WEEK

This is the primary KPI for every under-12 coach. Not wins. Not skill benchmarks. Not whether they can run your press break correctly. Do the athletes in your program want to be there? Do they leave on the weekend looking forward to next week?

> *"I'm coaching under-12s at the moment. The win and the loss isn't really all that relevant to us. We'll view our games this season as really just another training session, just with a scoreboard."*
>
> Rob Calder, Season 1

The coaches who lose athletes at under-14 and under-16 are very often creating the conditions for that loss at under-12. An athlete who doesn't enjoy the experience will not return. An athlete who doesn't return cannot develop. The love of the game (or the absence of it) is almost always set by the time they leave your under-12 program.

GOAL #2: IMPROVE THEIR FUNDAMENTAL MOVEMENTS

The under-12 years are the most important window for building the foundational physical and basketball movements that everything else is built upon. Stopping, pivoting, catching. Changing pace. Jumping off one and two feet. Dribbling without watching the ball. Shooting with both hands. Passing with accuracy.

These are not exciting things to coach. They are not what gets shared on Instagram. They are the difference between an athlete who can play at 16 and one who can't.

> *"The under-12 program would be about fun and just, let's play. No system. Let's just have skill development. Because if those foundations are solid at 12, you can add the systems at 14. If they're not solid, every subsequent layer rests on sand."*
>
> Mike Zeppel, Season 3

GOAL #3: GIVE THEM ENOUGH TOUCHES TO ACTUALLY IMPROVE

One of the most consistent observations across the podcast: in a standard under-12 team session, many athletes get very few meaningful ball touches. The coach who runs lines, 5-on-0 offence, and a long scrimmage may be giving each athlete fewer than 20 active reps in 90 minutes. European development programs at the same age give athletes 150 to 200 touches per session. The gap is enormous.

> **Try this**
>
> *Design every session so that every athlete is active for at least 80% of the time. No long queues. No drill where six athletes stand while one practices. 2v2 and 3v3 formats beat 5-on-0 and full scrimmage for touch volume at this age.*

WHAT TO TEACH

The under-12 curriculum

The podcast was remarkably consistent about what belongs in an under-12 curriculum and what doesn't. This is one of the areas where coaches most frequently get it wrong: either teaching too little (just roll the ball out) or too much (running an offence with twelve actions).

THE FUNDAMENTALS: DO THESE EVERY SESSION

These are the non-negotiables. Every session. Without exception. The coach who covers these consistently across a season produces athletes who arrive at under-14 ready to learn the next layer.

STOP • PIVOT • CATCH

The most important basketball skill cluster at this age. A jump stop into a strong pivot position. Catching the ball with two hands in a ready-to-play position. Ripping the ball away from an imaginary defender. These movements underpin everything: finishing, passing, shooting. Spend the first five minutes of every session here.

> **Try this**
>
> *Start every session with two minutes of stop-pivot-catch. Athletes self-toss, jump stop, pivot both directions, rip the ball. No defender needed. Just the habit. Do this 40 weeks a year and watch what happens by the end of the season.*

DRIBBLING: BOTH HANDS

The most common development failure at under-12: athletes who can only dribble with their dominant hand. The European under-19 teams that impressed Australian coaches on the BV tour stood out for one reason above all others: you couldn't tell who was left-handed and who was right-handed.

- Stationary dribbling: right hand, left hand, alternating.
- Walking with the ball: full court, both hands.
- Simple change of direction: crossover, between legs (for older under-12s), around the back (optional).
- Game pressure: can they dribble while looking up? Give them a visual target to find while dribbling.

> **Avoid this**
>
> *Don't let athletes practise ball handling while looking down. From day one, the standard is eyes up. If they can't do it while looking up, slow the drill down until they can. Don't accept eyes-down dribbling as normal.*

SHOOTING: FORM FIRST, DISTANCE LATER

> *"We're probably setting our players up for failure a little because of the size basketball they have to start with. A 10-12 year old with a size 6 ball shooting from 5 metres will develop a chucking motion. That's not on them, it's on us."*
>
> Ash Arnott, Season 5

- Start every shooting drill within two metres of the basket. Form shooting at the charge circle. Establish the release, the follow-through, the gaze target. Then add distance.

- Teach connection to the ground: legs driving the shot. Wide base. This is the mechanical foundation.
- Use a size 5 ball if your association provides it. If not, bring athletes closer to the basket.
- 50 form-shooting makes per session is a realistic target for under-12 athletes. Track it.

> **Try this**
>
> *Give athletes a summer homework task: 50 form-shooting makes per day, from within two metres of a basket. This takes 8–12 minutes. Over 40 days across a summer, that is 2,000 makes. From one drill. No trainer needed. Just a ball and a ring.*

PASSING: ACCURACY AND BOTH HANDS

- Teach the chest pass, bounce pass, and overhead pass as distinct tools for distinct situations.
- Practise passing with both hands. Give the toolbox; let the athlete choose the right tool in the game.
- The two-on-one drill is the best passing drill for this age group. It teaches the decision (pass or go?) in a game-like context with real consequences.

> *"Their eyes were up, they saw the cutter, they made a decision. That's exactly what I want. The execution needs work. Don't kill the creativity."*
>
> Rob Calder, Season 2

FINISHING: AT THE RIM, BOTH FEET

- Right-hand layup from the right side, left-hand layup from the left side. Every session, both sides.
- Teach the two-foot power layup as well as the one-foot running layup.
- The lowered ring (8-foot basket where available) is transformative at this age.
- When there's contact, it should be the attacker's choice, not something that happens to them: speed up into the defender's path with the second dribble, make a small shoulder-to-chest bump to stay on your line, then finish off one or two feet with either hand. Never a barge into a defender who's already set: that's a charge, and it teaches the wrong thing.*

> **Try this**
>
> *Run a '1v1 from the dunk spot' drill: athlete receives the ball one step from the basket and must finish with their non-dominant hand. Two minutes per session. Inside of three weeks, left-hand finishes will improve noticeably.*

ONE HELPER, ONE CALL*

Man-to-man still means helping a teammate who gets beaten, but keep it to one decision: the nearest defender watches the on-ball defender, not the ball, and calls "stay" (they've got it) or "go" (I'm coming), early and loud. The common mistake at this age is over-helping, not under-helping: a helper who goes when the drive was contained gives away an open shot for nothing. Save rotations behind the helper ("help the helper") and full shell drill for under-14 and up.

REBOUNDING: GO ON THE RISE OF THE SHOT*

As the shooter rises, decide you're in the contest, then attack the ball with two hands and catch it before it hits the floor (Guy Molloy's first rule of rebounding). Get it out to the sideline and push. Whether to crash the offensive glass or get back is an under-14 decision (see the Transition guide): at this age the shooting team sprints back.

** Added from the coaching clinics credited on the Sources page; all three are built up step by step in the Session Plans.*

WHAT NOT TO TEACH

The things that cost you development time

This is the section most under-12 coaches need most. The temptation to add complexity (an offence, a zone press, a set play) is understandable. It makes you feel like a 'real' coach. It often impresses parents. It almost always costs athletes development time they don't get back.

DON'T RUN A STRUCTURED OFFENCE

> *"I am a hundred percent against offence of any kind in under-12s other than pass-cut motion, dribble penetration, receiver spot stuff. Anything more and you're spending time teaching a system that athletes don't understand, using time you should be spending on the skills they need."*
>
> Darren Best, Season 7

> **Avoid this**
>
> *If you find yourself drawing up a play for your under-12s, stop. Ask yourself: is this teaching them to read the game, or to follow a script? If it's a script, throw it out and run 2v2 instead.*

DON'T RUN ZONE DEFENCE

> *"I was the one who kicked off the push for zone bans in under-12s. The final nail was: I was doing all this work on form and technique, and then in the game we're facing a zone and none of that work is being used. The zone was stealing our development time."*
>
> Zoe Carr, Season 9

> **Avoid this**
>
> *If your association allows zone or zone presses at under-12 level (even if it's technically legal) consider not running them. The wins you get are real. The development you steal is real too. Which matters more to you?*

DON'T USE THE ISOLATION AS YOUR GO-TO

At under-12 level, an isolation means nine athletes are standing still while one dribbles. The touch count collapses. The engagement collapses. The development collapses.

> **Try this**
>
> *Replace any drill where more than two or three athletes are waiting with a small-sided game version of the same concept. 2v2 and 3v3 create more active reps, more decision-making, and more fun than any lineup drill.*

DON'T PRIORITISE THE WIN

> *"Any director of coaching is going to be happy dropping a few games at under-12 level in order to develop players who are better skilled, better decision-makers, and more likely to progress. Don't measure yourself on the ladder. Measure yourself on what your athletes can do."*
>
> Season 5 conversation

DESIGNING YOUR SESSION

Practical structure for the weekend

The under-12 session is different from every other session in the pathway. Attention spans are shorter. The emotional stakes for athletes are higher. The coach has less preparation time than state or club development coaches. And yet this session is the most important one in the whole pathway.

THE ONE-MINUTE EXPLANATION RULE

Research cited by Dr Bubba Spillane in Season 5, and validated by every coach on the podcast: the attention window for an explanation in under-12s is shorter than you think. One minute maximum before athletes disengage.

- 30–60 seconds: explain the drill simply.
- 3 minutes: watch them attempt it. Don't intervene.
- 30 seconds: one teaching point: the single most important correction.
- Repeat.

SAMPLE SESSION STRUCTURE: 75 MINUTES

TIME	ACTIVITY	FOCUS
0–5 min	Free shooting: arrive and shoot. No instruction.	*Fun / transition*
5–10 min	Stop-pivot-catch ritual. Self-toss, jump stop, pivot both directions, rip.	*Foundation*
10–20 min	Ball handling: stationary then walking. Both hands. Eyes up.	*Skill*
20–35 min	Main skill block: shooting or finishing. Form close, then add distance.	*Skill*

35–50 min	Small-sided game: 2v2 or 3v3 half court. Apply the main skill.	*Application*
50–60 min	2v1 transition drill. Teaches passing decision and finishing under pressure.	*Decision-making*
60–70 min	Full court game: 4v4 or 5v5. Let them play. Coach less.	*Game*
70–75 min	Close: team huddle, one specific call-out per player, one home task.	*Culture*

THE MASTER PLAN FOR UNDER-12S

- FUNDAMENTALS: stop-pivot-catch, dribbling (both hands), passing, footwork
- FINISHING: right-hand layup, left-hand layup, two-foot power layup
- SHOOTING: form shooting, spot shooting, catch-and-shoot off a pass
- DEFENSIVE HABITS: on-ball positioning, not reaching, staying in front, communicating
- GAME CONCEPTS: pass-cut-replace, when to drive, how to space the floor
- CULTURE: team identity, how we respond to mistakes, how we celebrate teammates

GAME DAY

How to coach during the game

The under-12 game is a training session with a scoreboard. Treat it that way. The coaching decisions you make from the sideline during an under-12 game will shape your athletes' experience of competition for years to come.

TALK LESS THAN YOU THINK

> *"Under-12s will do what you tell them to do because they don't know any better. That's not a compliment to the coaching. You're building compliance, not intelligence."*
>
> Season 8 conversation

Talk during stoppages. During live play, let the game teach. A turnover has its own consequence. Your commentary on top of that consequence adds nothing.

PLAYING TIME: ALL PLAYERS, ALL THE TIME

- Equal time for all players across the first three quarters.
- Don't put the weakest player in the quietest moment of the game. Put them in when the game is alive and let them learn.
- Track your rotations. A simple tally prevents the unconscious pattern of over-playing your best athletes. Or let the Rotation Planner build an equal-time sheet you can print for the bench.

> **Try this**
>
> *Before every game, write the names of all your players on a piece of paper. As each player comes off, tick their name. By halftime, every name should have at least one tick. By three-quarter time, at least two.*

WHAT TO ACTUALLY SAY FROM THE SIDELINE

- Positional: 'Corner!' 'Back behind the line!' 'Find the open player!'
- Effort: 'Sprint back!' 'Chase it!'
- Praise the action: 'Good switch!' 'Yes, that pass!'
- Single teaching point per timeout, not three.

Afterwards, if the game was scored live in PlayHQ, Game Flow shows whether a timeout actually stopped a run, a good check that your one teaching point landed.

MANAGING PARENTS

The other team on your bench

The under-12 parent is, in the experience of most coaches, the most emotionally invested person in the building. Managing this well is as important a coaching skill as anything you do on the court.

SET EXPECTATIONS BEFORE THE SEASON STARTS

Send a one-page team philosophy document to every family at the start of the season covering:

- What success looks like this season (development, not wins).
- How playing time works (everyone plays, roughly equally).
- What you are teaching and why.
- How to give you feedback if they have concerns.
- Your sideline culture expectations (encouraging only).

> **Try this**
>
> *The sentence that prevents 80% of post-game parent conversations: 'At under-12 level, we don't keep score of their development the same way the scoreboard keeps score of the game. Our scoreboard is: did every athlete try something they couldn't do last week?'*

THE 24-HOUR RULE

> *"I know of clubs that say, hey, don't be talking to the coach straight after the game. Sit on it for a day and then we'll discuss it. By the time that next practice happens, everyone has calmed down."*
>
> Season 2 conversation

SIDELINE BEHAVIOUR

Have the conversation before the season. The ask is simple: cheer for effort, not outcome. 'Go!' is fine. 'Great job!' is fine. 'Shoot it!' 'Why didn't you pass?' are not.

> **Avoid this**
>
> *Don't wait for a sideline behaviour incident to happen before addressing it. Address it proactively, warmly, and in writing before the season. The conversation is much easier to have when no one is defending themselves.*

BUILDING TEAM CULTURE

What makes kids come back

Under-12 team culture doesn't build itself. You have to be deliberate about creating the environment because the athletes don't yet have the social experience or emotional literacy to build it for themselves.

THE FIVE-QUESTION SURVEY

On your very first session, before you run a single drill, give every athlete a piece of paper with five questions:

- What school do you go to?
- What's your favourite NBA, WNBA or NBL team?
- What's one thing you're good at outside of basketball?
- What's one thing about basketball you want to get better at this year?
- What's one thing about being on a team that you think is important?

Read every answer. Use the information across the first four weeks to show each athlete that you paid attention to what they said.

ONE SPECIFIC CALL-OUT PER SESSION

At the end of every session, make one specific, genuine positive call-out per athlete across the week. Not 'great effort'. Specific. 'Tom, I saw you switch from your right hand to your left in that 2v2. That's new. That's the work paying off.' Rotate who you call out so every athlete hears their name.

SIMPLE TEAM RITUALS

- A team name that they choose themselves.
- A pre-game huddle with a consistent phrase or call.
- A specific thing the team does when someone makes a great play.
- An end-of-session ritual: every player names one teammate who helped them.

When athletes design these rituals themselves, they own them. Give the athletes the prompt and let them decide the content.

QUICK REFERENCE

Under-12 coaching at a glance

QUESTION	ANSWER
What is my #1 goal?	Every athlete wants to come back next week.
What should every session include?	Stop-pivot-catch, both-hand dribbling, form shooting close to the basket, a small-sided game.
Should I run an offence?	Pass-cut-replace motion only. Nothing more complex.
Should I run zones?	No. Man-to-man only at under-12 level. Zone teaches standing still.
How long should I explain a drill?	60 seconds maximum. Then watch them do it. Then one correction.
Should I use isolations?	No. 2v2 and 3v3 formats give everyone more reps and more fun.
How do I handle playing time?	Equal time across the first three quarters. Track rotations with a tally.
What ball should I use?	Size 5 if available. If size 6 only, bring athletes closer to the basket.
Should I coach during live play?	Rarely. Let mistakes teach. Coach from stoppages.
How do I handle parents?	One-page philosophy document before the season. 24-hour rule for feedback.
How many shooting reps per session?	Aim for 50+ per session. Use small-sided formats.
Should I worry about the win?	No. Measure yourself on whether athletes improve and return.
When to introduce ball screens?	Not yet. Under-14 is early enough. Under-12s need movement skills first.
Best drill for this age group?	2v1 transition. Teaches the pass-or-drive decision with real consequences.
How to build team culture?	5-question survey on day one. One specific call-out per athlete per week. Simple rituals they design themselves.

A FINAL WORD TO WEEKEND COACHES

Nobody gives enough credit to under-12 coaches. You show up on a weekend (often after a full week of work) for athletes who think bouncing the ball off their foot is hilarious, who wave to their parents while you're explaining the drill, and who will ask you 'are we losing?' after the very first basket of the game.

You are doing the most important work in Australian basketball. Keep it fun. Teach the basics. Let the game teach. Show up next weekend.

> *"If at your core, that's why you get into coaching, the love of getting out there and interacting with kids, that can take you many places. And it's a pretty good place to start."*
>
> Helping Hoops founder, Season 1

RELATED GUIDES

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