

What Defense Should You Teach Youth Players (Zone, Man, Press)??

By - [Joe Haefner](#)



[Photo Source](#)

First, we commend all youth coaches for taking up such an important role in developing children! In the grand scheme of things, what defense or offense you pick doesn't matter in regards to how we develop the children's character on the teams that we coach.

Second, I think we can all agree that we want to develop better basketball players for the future and we want what is best for them.

Now, one of the most-debated topics is what defense should we teach youth players? Zone, Match Up, Pressing, Man, Amoeba?

The answer is without a doubt man-to-man defense! I can promise you that in the long-run, you will develop better basketball players by playing man to man defense.

Man To Man Defense Will Help You Win More Games In The Long Run and Develop Better Players

At times, you may not win as many games at first, but I guarantee you start winning more games by the 7th and 8th grade as long as the man to man defense principles are properly taught.

And the chances of those players making their high school teams will be dramatically higher.

The feeling of seeing players succeeding at higher levels, because of the foundation you set as a coach is so much more rewarding than winning a few more games at the youth level that you and the players will forget about after a few years.

If you use zone defenses and presses, while you read this article, please remember that we're not judging you or trying to be condescending by any means, because we've used zone defenses and presses at the youth level as well. But we feel like that was a mistake when it came to developing the players that we coached. And we all want what's best for the kids.

We hope that you read the entire article and share your thoughts below even if you disagree with our points. We want this to be a community where we debate things in a positive, constructive way and come to a better understanding of these issues.

Now before we delve into all of the reasons that you should play man to man defense at the youth and middle school level, let's examine why youth coaches typically go to zones, presses, and other defenses, the systemic issues, and why zone defenses and zone presses work.

Why Youth Coaches Go To Zone Defenses

First off, I don't have a problem with zone defenses. I believe that zone defenses combined with good defensive fundamentals can help teams win games. However, in most cases, they should not be used at the youth and middle school level.

Under the current system in the U.S., most coaches get the unnecessary burden of having to teach skills, zone offense, [man offense](#), press breakers, and defense with limited practice time. Some coaches only get one hour per week. Even at the high school level, it takes me at least 10 to 20 practices to get a good base to handle these situations. Some youth coaches barely get 20 practices within two seasons.

If we are concerned with the long-term development of youth basketball players, they should not even be playing 5v5 with the same rules as high school and NBA teams. As we've been saying all along, young kids should start out playing 3v3 half court, then 4v4, then 5v5. I first heard this from my high school coach 15 years ago. This is something that I've seen youth expert Bob Bigelow and many other great coaches preach for years. Not to mention, we introduce the game to kids before they are taught how to move efficiently.

As Bob Bigelow likes to say, "Adapt the game to fit the kids. Not the other way around."

If you would like to read more in depth on the systemic issues, please read these articles:

[Could 3 on 3 Basketball Be the Best for Youth Players?](#)

[What's Wrong With Youth Basketball Leagues \(And How To Fix Them\)](#)

[Should We Teach Basketball Skills to Kids Under the Age of 10?](#)

Not to mention, most youth coaches are volunteers who have full-time jobs and kids! So they barely have any time to educate themselves on how to teach basketball to youth players. Nobody educates them on the age-appropriate skills and how kids learn.

So what happens is that a coach hears from a colleague, faces a zone defense, or sees another team playing zone. Then, they see how much trouble it is giving the opposing team. Next, the coach implements the zone defense and realizes it only takes a few minutes a day to practice. And they weren't even sure how to teach man to man defense

in the first place. Next, games are closer and you might be winning a few games you shouldn't. So the coach decides he's sticking with the zone defense.

With the instant gratification of winning now and the need to please parents, coaches end up coaching for the outcome, rather than the process. And this does hurt youth players' development in the long run.

Why Zone Defenses Work At The Youth Level

Zone defenses also work at the youth level because:

- Players have not practiced enough yet to develop the proper ball handling skills to beat zone defenses and [break presses](#).
- Players are not strong enough to throw passes far enough and crisp enough to beat a zone. Defenses can send 3 or 4 defenders at the ball and still be effective.
- Players have not developed the necessary strength and coordination to shoot accurately from long-distance.
- Players have not developed the cognitive skills necessary to recognize situations quickly and react in the appropriate time needed.
- Opposing coaches don't have enough practice time to cover all of the situations.
- Unlike man to man defense, you don't even have to apply good defensive principles to be effective at the youth level.

Why Teaching Zone Defense Can Handicap Your Youth Players' Future and Why Man to Man Defense Is The Best Defense For Youth Players

1 - Develop Athleticism

Something I rarely hear coaches talk about in the man to man versus zone defense debate for youth players is athleticism.

Now who is going to develop into a better athlete?

Somebody who has to move all over the floor using many different movement patterns or a defender in a zone whom only has to guard in a 7x7 feet box. Also, in a zone defense, defenders are typically stuck in the post area or perimeter area. So they don't learn post and perimeter defense.

Now, you might argue that you don't use a lazy zone or that you have a trapping zone and that your players run all over the place.

Well, as a person that studies athletic development both as a hobby and as a basketball coach, I can tell you that even aggressive zone defenses do NOT develop athleticism the way man to man defense does.

Let's take your centers and/or forwards that you have towards the back of the zone as an example. (And by the way, these "big" players probably need to work on foot coordination and athleticism more than anyone). Just look at their feet as they play in the back of the zone. They rarely have to move quickly, get down in low stance, or transition from shuffle to cross over defensive movements. This changing from run, to shuffle, to cross over, is incredible for athletic development. This is one of the best things you can do. Their legs get stronger, faster, more coordinated, and more athletic.

And let's pretend that you even rotate your big guys to the front of the zone trapping to develop their athleticism, you still won't develop the same athleticism as playing man to man defense. With straight up man to man defense, you have to play 1v1 on-ball defense. There is nobody to trap or bail you out, except for help defense. So you have to move faster, work harder and smarter, and react quicker to keep the ball in front of you or out of the middle of the court.

Not to mention, the zone at the youth level usually forms bad habits. You'll find that players in trapping and pressing defenses will form bad habits, because they can get away with things defensively such as lunging out of position, constantly going for steals, and reaching all of the time. It's very hard to break these habits and in some cases, it doesn't happen. So in my opinion, this can wreck a player's basketball career if not approached properly.

Also, how many times have you seen a player who is extremely skilled get passed on for being not athletic enough? Now how many times do you see college coaches attempt to develop athletes who are not very skilled?

If you've been around the game, you know that many coaches are more willing to take a chance on an athlete who isn't very skilled compared to a skilled basketball player who isn't athletic. I'm not downplaying the importance of basketball skills. Developing basketball skills is super-important, but you also need to spend a considerable amount of time on developing athleticism.

If you don't believe me, go watch some NAIA and Division 3 games. These kids are skilled! They just aren't as big and as athletic as the D-2 and D-1 guys. Some of this is genetics. Some of this is a faulty athletic development system in the U.S.

Bottom line, this argument alone would deter me away from zone defenses, because of my background and belief that athleticism is so important not only in the game of basketball, but in all sports.

This is one of my favorite drills for developing basketball skills and athleticism:

<https://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/drills/1on1-defense.html>

Al Marshall is one of the best [zone defense](#) coaches in the world (if you don't believe me, just check out the reviews on his zone defense DVD). He uses the drill above every 2 to 3 practices because of its tremendous value to improving on-ball defense and athleticism.

Since we're talking about Coach Marshall, I figure we'd also mention that even Al does not allow his youth and middle school teams (7 to 14 year olds) to play zone defense.

2 - Players Develop A Better Basketball IQ Playing Man to Man Defense

One of the reasons I'm a big believer in motion offense is because I think it develops smarter basketball players and I'm a fan of man to man defense for the same reason.

Who is going to develop a better feel for the game?

Player A shuffles back and forth between two spots and only learns to defend on one part of the floor.

Player B who is transitioning to different spots on the floor and learning to defend screens, cutters, post players, ball handlers, shooters, etc.

Obviously, it's Player B. The more situations the player faces and the more repetitions the player gets in those situations with proper coaching and feedback will result in a better and smarter basketball player.

Now if Player B heads to a program that plays zone defense, they will be a very effective defender.

3 - Players Form Bad Defensive Habits By Using Zone Defenses and Presses

As mentioned above, a big problem with zone defenses and presses is that many youth coaches allow their players to develop bad defensive habits. Because youth players have not developed their coordination, strength, basketball skills, and general athleticism, defensive habits such as swarming the ball and lunging out of position for the steal every time will benefit them on the scoreboard.

In a zone defense, they also tend to just watch the ball and they can still be successful in regards to wins and losses at the youth level. In order to be successful with a man to man defense, they have to be aware of both the man and the ball. They HAVE to learn good defensive principles in order to be successful!

As these youth players get older, all of the sudden these bad defensive habits get exposed because kids are bigger, stronger, more coordinated, and more skilled.

Now, the kids with bad defensive habits are cut from teams, get less playing time, and in the extreme case, could even lose out on scholarship opportunities. Now, if you're at a school that doesn't cut, you just end up with a poor team and this hurts the player's chance of getting recruited. College coaches usually want good players from winning programs.

And you might be wondering, why doesn't coach just teach them the right way to play when they get to high school?

- It can takes years to break the bad defensive habits. After players have spent most of their [youth basketball](#) career using poor defensive fundamentals, it's very difficult to break the bad habits.
- They'd rather keep the players with good habits and spend their time on other things to make them better players and make the team better. After trying to do this a few times, most coaches just end up cutting these players right away because they have learned that the process is so frustrating and not worth their time. The coaches do this to keep the team's best interests in mind.

You also have to know [man to man defense principles](#) to have success at the higher levels even if you use zone defense as your primary defense. You can ask Syracuse's Jim Boeheim who is known for running a very successful 2-3 zone defense and he will tell you the same thing. As mentioned above, Al Marshall does the same thing.

Arguments For Zone Defenses At The Youth Level

Zone Defense Isn't The Problem - Lack of Defensive Fundamentals Are The Problem

I've also heard the argument that zone defenses aren't the problem, it's the lack of fundamentals being taught with the zone defense that is the problem. I agree with this. But it is a rarity at this age level for coaches to teach the proper defensive fundamentals with zone defense. And I still don't believe zone defenses are age-appropriate for youth teams for the same reasons mentioned above. On average, players are too weak and uncoordinated to execute the offensive principles that beat zone defenses.

Look at the baseball system. Players are eventually going to be taking leads off of first base and pitching from 60 feet, 6 inches, but we don't start the youth players out that way. We shorten the mound and we don't let players take leads off of first base until they reach a certain age. Baseball modifies the game for youth, not the other way around like the current basketball system.

Players Can't Advance the Ball Against Aggressive Man to Man Defense

I agree that if you play a super-athletic team that plays aggressive man to man defense, you can have more problems with this team than if they had played a zone defense. I think there are two solutions here.

1. If the coach is winning by a lot, they should call off the dogs. Don't let them defend outside the 3-point line or play a zone defense if they think that would help. That is what I have done in a few games where we ran into this problem.
2. Find equal competition. It's senseless for both teams to play a game where you win or lose by 40+ points. I realize that I'm spoiled because I coach in Kansas City, so it's easier to find similar competition due to the large population, but do your best to find teams that will be productive to play against. When I organized my first youth league in small-town Iowa at age 22, I called local teams with similar skill levels and organized a 6-team league.

These Kids Will Never Play Basketball Beyond Middle School or High School

Basketball is one of the latest developing sports. Unless you can see the future, I don't believe anybody can truly figure out who is going to develop into a good basketball player or not. Here are just a few reasons why:

- Late growth spurts

See Michael Jordan - grew 6 inches between sophomore and junior season in high school.

See Scottie Pippen - grew 6 inches in college.

See Bill Russell - was 5'10 in the 10th grade.

See Shaquille O'Neal - cut from 9th grade basketball team for being too clumsy.

These are just a few examples. As I'm sure with a little research, you would find many more in basketball and other sports.

- Passion and hard work. Sometimes, passion and hard work for something will take players a lot further than somebody who is a little bit more naturally talented. Believe it or not, in this start earlier and do-more-at-younger-age era, it's not what you do prior to puberty that counts, it's what you do post-puberty that's going to make the biggest difference in your basketball development. Steve Nash didn't start playing until age 12. Dirk Nowitzki started around the same age.

Build a Winning Tradition

At some schools, coaches have the challenge of building a program. Maybe the team has lost at all levels from varsity to youth for a long time. Due to this, excitement about the program is low to put it kindly and participation is low. In order to create a buzz and get kids involved, you need to use some tactics such as zone defenses and zone presses that might help you win more games.

This one is hard for me to argue with. However, you want to be careful. You would still need to make sure proper defensive principles and basketball skills are being worked on in every practice. Otherwise, the situation could be a catch-22. You might start winning more games at the youth level and get more involvement, but due to the bad habits being formed, you still don't win many more games at the varsity level.

Also, maybe you want to develop a "winning" attitude. This also needs to be handled with care, because what is the underlying message that is or is NOT being communicated. It could be harder to convey that working hard, doing the right thing, and avoiding quick-fixes will be better for you in the long-run.

The Zone Defense Gives Our Kids A Chance To Compete

I know some coaches that teach man to man defense, but will use a zone defense against a team that is far superior with talent. This one doesn't really bother me as much as long as the team doesn't get in the habit of playing zone defense every game.

I prefer to try a sagging / pack-line type defense to counter the more athletic teams. If I still have lots of trouble, I MIGHT use a zone defense.

They Have To Learn How To Play Against Pressure and Zones When They're Older So They Should Be Playing Against It Now

Yes. I think we can all agree that they will play according to those rules when they get older, but is that really the right approach?

Kids also may need to learn how to drive a car, learn calculus, and learn how to raise a family and communicate with their spouse, but we're not going to throw them the keys and have them get in LA rush hour at age 10, we're not going to teach them calculus before they understand basic math, geometry, and algebra, and we're definitely not going to tell our 12 year old kid to go start a family.

It's all about progressions and doing what's right for their long-term development. Presses and zones are advanced basketball strategies and need to be saved for the older age groups.

Now, I don't have issues with competitive or elite 7th and 8th grade teams doing these things. To me, that's more of a to-ma-to / to-mah-to issue. Younger kids from the 3rd to 6th grade levels, they need to learn how to play the game, physically develop, and psychologically develop before zone defenses and presses are used.

Possible Solution To Work on Zone Offense With Advanced Youth Players

I wouldn't advise this until the kids are 12 or 13, but if coaches got together before a game during the second half of the season and said let's work on playing against a 2-3 zone defense during the 2nd quarter, I believe the benefits would be outstanding. That way, you could introduce [zone offensive principles](#) when the kids are ready and work on them in a game environment.

Even though it takes effort, discipline, and time, man to man defense is by far the best route to go in developing players.

Among many other things, it improves athleticism, basketball IQ, basketball skills, and the athlete's chances to succeed at the next level.