Coaching on How-to Dribble a Basketball

Learning Objectives:

1. Parents/coaches will better understand how young children learn best.
2. Parents/coaches will better understand the physical and mental limitations of young children and how detailed instruction needs to get.
3. Parents/coaches will be provided scripts that will help them confidently teach techniques that work for young children of every skill level.
4. Parents/coaches will be provided games that can be incorporated into the learning process.

5. Parents/coaches will be provided a seamless approach designed to keep dribbling simple and make learning fun.

**Teaching Time per Skill:** 5 Minutes

**# of Steps:** 3

**Level of Instructional Difficulty:** Medium/Hard

**Ages Appropriate for:** 4 years +

**Introduction**

Teaching dribbling requires leveling the playing field when working with young children. Dribbling is a skill that requires hand-eye coordination. Something to keep in mind as you teach is that **young children tire more quickly when practicing sports skills that emphasize hand-eye coordination.** When young children's mental resources are exhausted they often lose focus. We, as parents and coaches, need to be aware of this and blend our teaching approaches. **When the time comes to teach drills involving intense work on hand-eye coordination, we need to provide young children extra breaks for recovery.**

I am often asked, how do you vary your teaching approaches to accommodate for the limitations of working with young children? I have a rule. It is universal throughout all my teachings. Arguably, I believe it is what has allowed me, in the interest of teaching young children better, explore sports more thoroughly than anyone else has dared to do before now. I believe if you follow this rule, you too can discover the more creative side of sports that works for young children. In fact, if you are going to work with young children I don't believe you can do it and do it effectively without remembering Coach Pickles' #1 rule. **Rule #1 is Break all the rules.**

Obeying this simple rule will allow you to cover a lot more ground with young children as you are about to find out. Rules are important and I promise you there will be a proper time to teach the rules of the game. It doesn't hurt to tell a child to dribble when they are playing basketball. What I hope you would avoid is the deep explanations why dribbling is so important. This is well beyond the capacities of most young children. If you, as a parent or coach, can keep rule #1 in mind, I promise your coaching successes will be more plentiful and your overall experiences more fruitful.
Step 1: GETTING STARTED: THE ASSESSMENT

Young children's dribbling skill levels will vary. For the younger age groups, dribbling is best learned through doing rather than standing around waiting and watching. Be mindful not to over-coach. Teaching dribbling to young children is easier than many coaches make it. With this said, I suggest starting with an early action step that has helped me effectively teach 1000's of young children, even the most resistant. Teaching young children how to dribble can be done in less time than the 2 minute how-to video you could watch about dribbling. Again, it doesn't have to be complicated.

1. To start, I simply ask the question, "What is dribbling?" Ask this question and you're sure to be surprised at how inspired young children are to help show you what dribbling is. Play dumb. Allow them to dribble where they are standing. Even children that don't dribble well are eager to help show me what dribbling is. And, I will just watch them standing (static) trying to master the dribble without interruption. For fun, I follow with another question, "Are you sure that is dribbling?"

2. After several minutes, I like to get young children to begin moving up and down the court. This is where a child will be hesitant and say, "I can't dribble." I will encourage him to walk with the group. As he does I gently encourage him to simply bounce the ball once and catch it. I repeat this a few more times and miraculously it seems to unlock their confidence. You'll notice I didn't focus on dribbling as it is traditionally thought about. Some children require taking baby steps at first, but after a little nudge they are on their way.

Discussion

By simply asking the question what is dribbling, we set young children up for immediate success. Think about it, instruction starts on a level everyone can understand. It shouldn't take 5 minutes to explain dribbling. This just builds up the anxiety in some young children's heads. Even very young children understand the concept of letting go, bouncing and trying to catch the basketball. Sure the ball will get away from time to time; your job is to let them retrieve it, this is part of the learning process. You see children mimic us, if you respond in a disappointed fashion they respond in kind, lose confidence, and quit trying early in the process. Avoid dealing with confidence issues by not making a big deal of them losing control of the basketball. As I said before, it is part of the learning process, something often forgotten. When this happens, I simply say, "Recover." Then, carry on as if nothing unusual happened.

You'll notice I didn't charge into instructing how to stand, tell them about hand or head placement, or explain how high or low the basketball should bounce. Young children are only able to truly understand routine directions like dribble or bounce the ball. They will mimic
anything you tell them and just like a talking parrot, they don't necessarily comprehend nor should they be expected to. Sports instruction, dribbling or otherwise, must be kept simple and fun. What I have found is most young children don't yearn to dribble, most yearn to shoot. Dribbling is often an afterthought. Of course there are rare cases but for most young children, they must be conditioned to dribble. This is done best by doing. If you want to teach them some introductory dribbling techniques consider some of the ones I've put together in the next section.

**Step 2: Instructional Beginnings**

Teaching young children dribbling requires leveling the playing field. I have found poor dribblers will invariably be intimidated by more advanced dribblers. When this happens you are dealing with a whole separate set of confidence issues. What I am going to share with you now is a low-intensity drill, dribbling backwards, that is designed to help kids work on the mechanics of dribbling without even knowing it. This drill works for young children of all skill levels.

**The Backwards Dribble**

*Teaching backwards dribbling levels the playing field* by making everyone a bit uncomfortable. *What backwards dribbling does is teaches good form and body positioning; it challenges young children to focus directly on the ball. The good thing for you, as the parent/coach, is it doesn't require a lot of lengthy instruction to teach.* The backwards dribble is an under-taught skill that has been instrumental in helping the children, especially young ones, make fast improvements in their dribbling technique.

Dribbling backwards helps young players:

- find balance
- move their feet out of the way to avoid dribbling the ball off of them
- naturally positions their head over the ball
- be less distracted and more able to concentrate on what they are doing

**Step 3: Teaching Dribbling Fundamentals**

Dribbling fundamentals can be taught to young children using two different styles of dribbling, the Speed Dribble and something I like to call the *Strong-Arm©* Dribble. Both emphasize securing the basketball from the defense and each can be easily taught in ways young children are able to understand. As you will learn from many of my teachings, I like to start the learning without the use of equipment. Young children are not naturally multi-taskers and they are easily distracted. In this case, I like to challenge young children.
Before getting started get the basketballs out of the way by having children squeeze their basketball between their feet. This will stop them from running off during your two-minute spiel. Leave the basketballs in this position until you're ready to use them.

**Strong-Arm© Dribble** (Refer to picture above)

This is an otherwise complex skill that can be taught quickly and easily to young children. What I do is break the skill down into its simplest components and have a little fun with it. As a parent or coach, you have about 10 seconds to get to an action step before losing children's attention. Save the lengthy explanation and later frustration and begin by simply asking, "**Show me your muscles!**" Stick with me through this. Then, I will have fun walking up and down the row tapping on young children's muscles. I say to them, "**Man, those are big muscles!**" Young children love this. What I am doing has nothing to do with basketball. I am relaxing the children, getting down on their level, breaking down the fears of some, and getting them to buy into me and the type of fun basketball can provide. As a coach, what you are also doing is priming them for the next bit of instruction that will be necessary to teach them.

The children are posed and showing you their muscles, it is now time to create their Strong-Arm©. Since most children will show you their muscles by bending at the elbow and pointing their fists either towards their ears or towards the sky, you already have them half way to the Strong-Arm© position. As a visual reference for you, imagine being in their same muscle posed position. If you took one fist that is pointed up and pounding it on an imaginary table in front of you, you will have created the Strong-Arm© position. Essentially, after you demonstrate to kids how it should look what you should see is all their forearms. Their arms are flat at a 90 degree angle in front of them.

**Script**

1. After asking, "**Show me your muscles**" demonstrate the Strong-Arm© position.

2. Ask them, "**Can you create a Strong-Arm© straight out in front of you?**" Next you will tell them, "**I am going to come around and check your strong your.**" This requires tapping on the top of the arm of each child to make sure it doesn't drop. As you do say, "**Yep, that is a Strong-Arm©! Good Job!**" After you've done this have some fun and humor them by having one child push down on your arm. Let it fall, then flop it up and down and tell them, "**No, noodle arms.**"

**Add the basketball**

Up to now, we've varied up the dribbling instruction to make learning fun and not to wear the kids out mentally. If you have followed this seamless method thus far, you should feel good. Children are learning from you every step of the way and having fun learning from you. Before leaping into getting them to demonstrate how to dribble with their Strong-Arm© I like to get
them walking up and down the court with their Strong-Arm© up. Tell them to pick up their basketballs from between their legs and hold it on their pocket. No dribbling, on your cue children will just walk. Young children's arms have a tendency to get tired so you must gently encourage them as they walk to keep their Strong-Arm© up.

Script

1. Add the dribble. Tell them, "Put the basketball on your pocket and hold up your strong arm." Once they are all in position, tell them, "Keeping two feet on the (base)line, dribble keeping your strong arm UP." Do not be afraid to stay with static dribbling until children exhibit confidence in what they are doing.

2. Once they are ready, get them moving up and down the court. Encourage and praise the strong arm. Your assessments should be less focused on the dribbling and more on the Strong-Arm© component of the drill.

Game

1. Play a game where the kids DO NOT dribble but instead focus on creating their Strong-Arms©. Each child will try to knock the ball out of another child's hand but protect his own ball using his Strong-Arms©.

Speed Dribble

A fun and much less complex dribble, the Speed Dribble requires young children to move quickly as they control the basketball. Young children do not understand the idea of dribbling under control. The following is how I discuss control and how I introduce in in conjunction with the speed dribble concept.

Explaining Control

1. Ask, "Do race cars drive fast or slow?" Answer: Fast. "What happens if the race car driver goes too fast?" The kid answer, "He will crash!"

Dribble

1. "The next dribble is called our speed dribble." Ask, "Do you think we will go fast or slow?" Answer: Fast. Ask, "What happens if we go too fast?" Answer: We will crash.

2. Tell them, "Dribble as fast as you can up the floor but be careful not to do what?" Answer: Crash.

Get them dribbling up and down the floor. Control them by integrating stop's using a whistle or red light, green light game. Do not over-instruct the speed dribble skill with young children. They are naturally going to double dribble and travel for a time and referees in the early
leagues understand this. Unless it is excessive referees won't call it at all. Just getting young children to learn how to dribble continuously at different paces is a big accomplishment.

Game

1. **Race Track Game.** Every child knows what a race car looks like and that it travels fast. Create a race track with a circle of cones. Line young children up on the starting line. Tell them their basketballs are now race cars. Every race car has a number on its side, ask children to tell you what the number of their race car is. Ask them what race cars sound like and get them to make the noises. Tell them they are going to have to dribble and steer their race car around the track three times. As they go around, offer to fill their race car up with gas holding out your gas pump (finger) and making the sound pumping gas makes. When they are done, have them go the other way for three laps. Have fun with it.

**Instructional Reminders**

- Have patience. A few steps at a time. Children learn best by doing. Conversation is one way of "doing" kids can enjoy. Dribbling is not always easy. Work on it in increments and keep instruction light. Children can quickly get frustrated if they are not dribbling well.
- Use a hands off approach to teaching. Use easy phrases children can understand and remember. This way they can be empowered through self-direction and self-correction, and learn more because the instruction requires their focus and concentration.
- Inspire children with praise. Encouragement can allow you control you otherwise wouldn't have. Children live for praise. Positive feedback builds confidence, improves listening capacity, helps develop emotional maturity, and enables a child's ability to find value in self-improvement.

Good luck and enjoyable teaching.

**Stationary Ball Handling**

Hand out a basketball to all the kids standing on a dot and ask them to hold the ball under their **chicken wing**! Remind them about their Strong-Arm© positioning. Have the kids stand on dots.

1. **Around the World:** Circling the basketball first around your head, than your waist, Finally, put your legs together and take the ball around both legs at the knees. Then spread your legs, bend at the waist, and take the ball around one leg. Then the other.
2. **Around feet figure 8**
3. **Eyes on Coach:** toss catch, claps, drop and catch
4. **On your knees:** use finger pads, one hand (switch hands), circles opposite direction
5. **Dribble sitting down**
6. **Lift legs and switch**
7. Lay down then sit up dribbling
8. Relay of over under, trunk twists, etc.

Fun Game: Red Light-Green light w/ball &/or Simone Says

Set-Up: Have children at one end of the court standing with the ball under their chicken wing.

Objective: You are the traffic light at one end of the court and the kids are cars driving their basketballs. When you call out "green light," kids dribble towards you. When you call out "red light," kids must go to control position. If the kids don’t go into control position quickly enough, they must go back to the beginning and start over. As an addition to this game you can yell out "black light" and they have stop and dance, or you can yell out "traffic cop" and have the kids perform a turn and dribble back to end line before they get a ticket.

*Coaching Point: Show how they can protect and shield the ball with their strong Arm Position.

Younger kids: Point out that you are a friendly cookie monster and that we are just having fun.

Older Kids: Choose one child to be the cookie monster for each round.

Skills Used: Shielding with Strong Arm Position, Dribbling and turning

**Play a game of Simone Says if their attention span is become short