

Fishing



with Kids

Rod, Reel and Action!

BY STEVE HICKOFF



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Remember what it was like when you started fishing? It's often best to keep that in mind as you teach your youngster how to cast a spinning rod or bait a hook. Put yourself in their shoes. It really wasn't that long ago . . .

Maybe you picked up recreational angling on your own. Maybe you had a mentor lead the way. Most likely, it's a combination of both. Either way, to share the love of this tradition, you have to stay calm and persevere. Again, pass along the fun of it . . .

PATIENCE, PLEASE

I am both the son of an angling father, who got me into fishing early, and an angler who has shared my love of it with my daughter. Like many of you, I've seen this subject from both sides, and here's what I've found . . .

Whether you are an adult trying to teach a child to fish, or a child learning to catch trout and bass from an adult, patience rules.

Kids learn by doing, and especially by first watching someone fish. Be an example.

For a long time, my dad rowed and paddled the various boats and canoes I fished from. Then one early morning on a trip to Canada, he let me do it on my own. That significant moment stuck with me: I was being trusted to the job.

Share that trust.

At home, my dad taught me various knots: first the clinch, then the all-important improved clinch knot. The tricky blood knot too. I have never forgotten the lessons, and even after decades, each time I tie one, which is often for many anglers, I think of him, and of that generous gift of time. It takes steady hands to tie a fishing knot,



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Kids fish free in N.H. until age 16. Collecting worms for bait is part of the fun (above). Practice casting with a plug at home before you head for the pond (below).



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and even more patience to teach a kid to do it.

My father let me use lures from his tacklebox, a sacred place to me, full of fascinating contents – off-limits to my investigations some of the time; other times not. Neatly organized rows of now classic lures awaited my attention: the Zara Spook, the Jitterbug, the Hula Popper, Pikie Minnow, and Rapala floating and jointed minnow.

Share your gear.

Think it's too early to start your child out with fly-fishing basics? I got lucky, with a fly rod put in my hands as a grade schooler. Seriously. Now I'm not saying I mastered it immediately, for sure. Even as the author of a fly-fishing book (*The Flyfisher's Guide to Northern New England*), I'm still not sure at times. Still, his early encouragement meant everything. Thanks to steady angling

instruction, I can roll-cast a fly in my sleep, even if I can also still tangle tippets with the best of them.

Now, granted, my dad's teaching style was a little different than mine as a parent. He'd show me how to use gear and how to fish that tackle, but then he would, in his words: "Go up to the next riffle."

Tough love, that was. He fished within sight, but not exactly right there. If I somehow got a wind knot in my line, which seemed to happen more often than not, he was usually too far away to beg for help. The genius of that! I'd be relegated to figuring it out, and you know what? That's how I learned.

Let your child learn a little without your direct guidance. Avoid being one of those so-called "helicopter parents." If I got snagged on the stream bottom, I'd solve the challenge. Miss a fish? I'd try harder the next time a trout swiped at my fly.

I learned by doing after he first showed me how. Now granted, I was and still am the independent sort. Maybe your kid is, too – or isn't. You have to figure that out for yourself . . . and you will.

KID BECOMES DAD

When I became a father, one of the first outdoor activities I could enjoy with my young daughter – other than playing with Beanie Babies indoors, something she shared with me – was fishing.

We, of course, first picked out the prettiest rod at the local supplier. We then bought a new tacklebox, which was soon filled with bobbers, lures and supplies from my tacklebox. She even got a new fishing vest from my mom-in-law: pink, don't you know.

Finding bait isn't gender specific, despite what some say. To my great pleasure, we dug our own worms – something I'd always done as a kid – and now my daughter enjoyed it, too: looking under rocks on our property, gently lifting our wriggling finds into the bait box, and, of course, returning them there if we didn't use them all.

You'll have to decide together whether to keep or release your catch. My dad released his fish, as he wasn't much on eating or preparing trout or bass, but as a kid I kept plenty, as my mother encouraged me to cook fish, since I liked it.

Your child might want to experience the fun of

Practice Makes (Almost) Perfect

Try these tips to introduce fishing to your youngster:

- Purchase a fishing rod and reel – smaller than your adult version – that fits your child.
- At first, have your child practice casting without hooks. Remove hooks from an old lure and attach the disarmed plug to the line. With this rig, your child can practice casting for accuracy in the yard. Make a game of it.
- Before attaching bait to a fishhook, discuss safety issues,

such as watching for people standing behind and near them when they cast. Also, talk about the spiny dorsal fins of our warmwater species.

- Don't care to use live bait? Artificial lures such as plastic worms for bass and spinners for trout work fine, too.
- Teach fishing basics over a period of time, not all at once.
- **Keep this motto in mind: Fun before frustration.**

~ S.H.

Seasonal Fishing in the Granite State

- **Trout** – Satisfies the kid desiring steady spring action. Keep an eye on weekly Fish and Game stocking reports at www.FishNH.com.
- **Summertime angling** – Panfish provide the most action. Bluegills. Sunfish. Crappie. Pinch those hook barbs down to make release easy.
- **Saltwater** – Whether caught from a boat, bridge or shoreline, a striped bass might provide that thrill of catching a truly big fish.
- **Ice-fishing** – Plenty of excitement for kids, here, too. That orange tip-up flag springing skyward just never gets old

~ S.H.

providing a meal for your family, or that youngster might gain as much pleasure in simply releasing that wiggly catch back where it was lifted from the water. Take a camera along and hold the memory that way. As parents, you'll know what to do, just based on talking to your child.

SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY

Naturalist and writer Henry David Thoreau said it best: "Simplify, simplify." That's true for teaching a kid how to fish.

When I became a father, one of the first outdoor activities I could enjoy with my young daughter...was fishing.

Early on, I decided I wouldn't fish up at the next riffle as my dad did, but rather be there with my daughter: one rod, one reel and one baited hook under a bobber. This simple approach kept my own time fishing out of the equation, and allowed me to teach her how to do it.

And, yeah, to be honest, once while she ate her lunch and enjoyed a juice box, I tried a cast or two on her little pole. "Hey daddy, that's my rod!" she protested.

Once my daughter could master a cast, I let her. If her back cast wandered close to my head, I'd move away with some gentle commentary. If she snagged a bobber on an overhanging branch, I'd patiently reach up to yank it out, remembering the last time I did that myself (not uncommon when fly-fishing!). Little by little, I'd have to do less and less helping, until that day arrived when she baited, cast, reeled in, hooked and landed a fish on her own.

I'm not the perfect parent. Who is? Still, the teaching and learning continues . . .

"Daddy, can you take that bass off the hook? It's flopping too much."

"Sure honey, no problem."

The most important thing to avoid when teaching your kid how to fish is taking yourself too seriously. Have fun with your child. Leave your ego at home.

Put those limit-filling desires aside and relax. It's not just about catching your legal take, but also just hanging out under the blue (and, yes, rainy gray) sky. Be a model for them. Have fun.

I remember one time my daughter had briefly hooked a fairly large bass, a fish that tossed the hook just as fast. I was bummed, and showed it. Her words, wise at such a young age, settled me: "Daddy, it's only a fish."

Sometimes the teaching goes both ways.

Shortly after I'd moved to New England, now well over 20 years ago, my father visited New Hampshire and, of course, we went fishing. While I was fortunate enough to catch one of the biggest smallmouth bass I've ever landed on a fly rod with him along, another memory sticks with me.

As I handled the oars of my little aluminum boat, my dad's mouth turned up into a smile. "That's why your mom and I had you," he deadpanned. "We had you to row."

Clearly the angling torch had been passed. **W**

Steve Hickoff is a book author, newspaper columnist, magazine feature writer and regular contributor to N.H. Wildlife Journal.



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Cora's big bass (above) proves that little rods can catch big fish! Purchase a fishing rod that fits your child. Fishing involves learning new skills, like removing hooks from the fish (below).



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