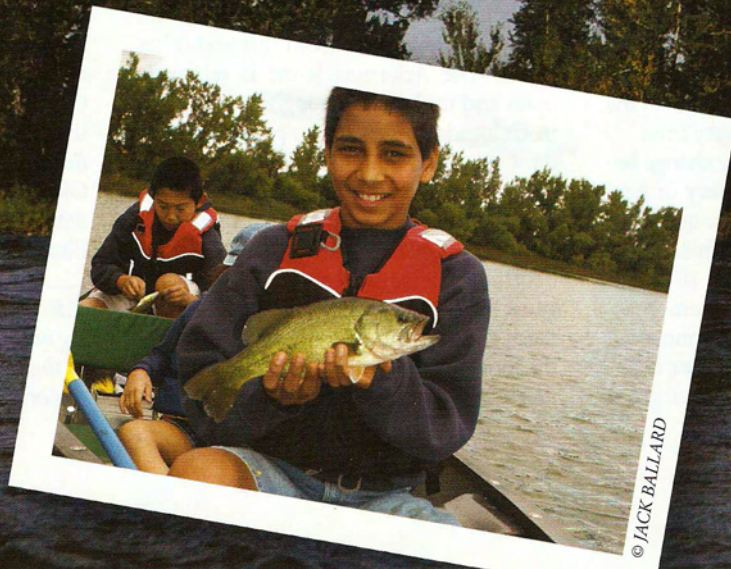


# Fishing, A Family Affair

As kids mature, so does their approach to fishing

By Lisa Densmore



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The colossal pumpkinseed dangling from the jig with the lime green twister tail was so big I thought it was a bass until I saw its gold and turquoise markings. Zoe, age 8 and the youngest of our four children, smirked with delight. She had landed the first fish of our family canoe-camping trip, ahead of her three older brothers and was rather proud of it, not for the length and girth of her prize, but because it was the first. **Kids get a different kick from catching fish than adults.**

Two of the boys ran to Zoe, curious about the fish, excited at the prospect of catching their own, but also more than a wee bit jealous that their younger sister had hooked the first one. The third boy glanced casually at it from afar. He was more interested in lighting the campfire at that moment.

We are an outdoor family. Fishing is a part of that lifestyle. Though all of our kids know how to fish, they've taken to it in different degrees. They've each had the same opportunities to cast a line, yet not all of them are passionate about it. Three would fish all day when the chance arises, whereas the fourth

has merely a passing interest. He would rather take pictures of everyone else's fish than catch them himself. That's okay. All four kids like to be out there with us, so we can still make fishing a family affair.

Every child is an individual with an affinity for some activities over others. While it's impossible to persuade every kid to pursue piscine with the same passion as a parent, here are a few things that improve the chances of turning most of them into at least casual anglers:

**Wait until they are old enough.** The former host of an outdoor show on PBS, I used

to go fishing as a means of exploring various geographic areas or revealing new environmental research. During one episode, while fishing with a biologist named Mark, he boasted how his 2-year-old son caught an 18-inch brown trout on a fly line. While the youngster may have helped hold the rod, I'm willing to bet Mark did the casting and reeled in the trout, especially a large feisty brown.

Most children don't have the coordination to handle a rod, usually a spinning rod, before about 4 years old. At that age, they can hold it, watching a bobber. By age 6 or 7, they can usually cast a spinning rod by themselves,



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reel in and cast again. By age 8, they might begin handling a fly rod with enough coordination to hook a fish. Many kids pick up casting with a fly rod fairly easily as it is a simple fore-aft motion. It's the other aspects of fly fishing that make it more difficult to master.

**Plan it together.** Whether an afternoon by a local creek or a multiday road-trip to a new body of water, kids develop more ownership in the activity, in this case fishing, if they help plan it. In the case of the camping trip in which Zoe landed that monster pumpkinseed, our kids packed their own dry bags, helped plan our meals then went shopping with me for the food. They also picked out some new lures to try. Though I had to repack the dry bags and veto a 3-pound bag of gummy worms at the grocery store, the preparation for the trip was enjoyable family time that added to the kids' anticipation of the adventure.

**Pick a fishy spot.** If a 6-year-old catches six fish in a half-hour the first day, the odds are much higher he'll want to go again. Next time, he may have the patience to catch three fish in an hour. On his third outing, he might catch only one fish in two hours, but he'll still want to go again and again. The first couple of times are the most critical for hooking a kid on fishing. The point is not necessarily for a child to catch lots of fish. In truth, too much success too quickly does not make a lifelong angler. What's important is to have some success and a boatload of fun.

In addition to a place known for hooking fish, pick a spot where your child can cast without getting hung up on trees and reel in without snagging a bunch of aquatic vegetation or a log. As an adult, de-weeding a hook every other cast is inconvenient. For a kid, it's a frustrating turn-off.

Likewise, it's okay to return to the same spot over and over again. Kids don't care and often like the predictability of a familiar place. It's adults who want a change of scenery. If a kid experiences a modicum of success and becomes comfortable with their surroundings early on, they'll tolerate slow days with more patience, to a point.

**Keep it short.** As an adult, time disappears when I'm fishing. I can cast my first fly at noon then suddenly the clock chimes 6 p.m. If I kept my kids on the water that long, there would be a family mutiny. As they've gotten older, they've tolerated more time with a rod in their hands, but I would still rather leave with them wanting more, rather than whining for less. Even if the fish are biting, it's best to keep an outing with kids on the short side.

**Teach them about the fish.** Wildlife intrigues children. Whenever one of my kids reels in a fish, we examine it closely. Of course we cover the traits that interest anglers of all ages, such as identifying the species and determining how long it is, but we also delve further. Younger kids in particular like to look at parts of the fish, its eyes, its gills, inside its mouth, its fins, even where its poop comes out.

Fishing also offers opportunities to teach kids about the environment, boating skills and water safety. It can be as fun for my sons to watch an osprey dive a hundred feet into the water and then take to the air again with a cutthroat in its talons, as it is for them to catch one themselves. My daughter might tell her friends more about a shy whitetail fawn in the reeds along the shoreline than about the toothy pike she reeled in, but I don't misunderstand that to mean birds and beasts are more important to her than fish. Fishing imparts memorable wildlife encounters of all kinds. It's fine for children to like fishing as a way to witness other aspects of nature. It's all part of the positive experience they come to associate with fishing.

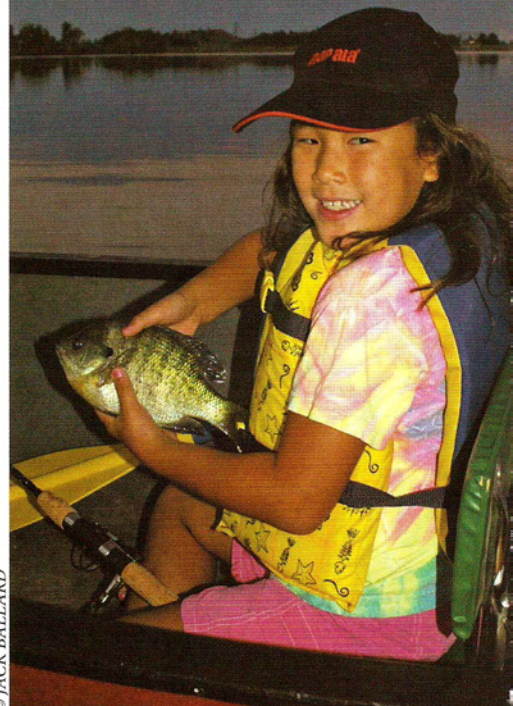
**Give kids the right gear.** With our oldest son, we made the mistake of giving him a cheap kid's set-up when we first took him fishing thinking it was a low-risk investment if he didn't like it. In reality it greatly increased the odds that he would never go again. The toy-like rod was difficult to cast and gave him zero control reeling in the one fish he did hook. The rest of our kids learned with the real rods.

If you really want a child to become an angler, avoid giving him or her the cheap kid's stuff. A light rod and closed-compartment, push-button reel is a better choice for young kids. It's simple to use and doesn't tangle easily. When they're ready for fly fishing, a mid-flex 4- or 5-weight rod is perfect for a kid to cast. It's light enough so they won't fatigue quickly and agile enough to handle a range of fishing situations.

The size of the hook matters, too. Smaller hooks allow a more graceful presentation regardless of the type of rod and can hook a wider size-range of fish. Unless a kid has been fishing for a long time, frequent small catches tend to outweigh one large one. And smaller hooks tend to be easier to remove whether it's the parent or the kid that's doing it.

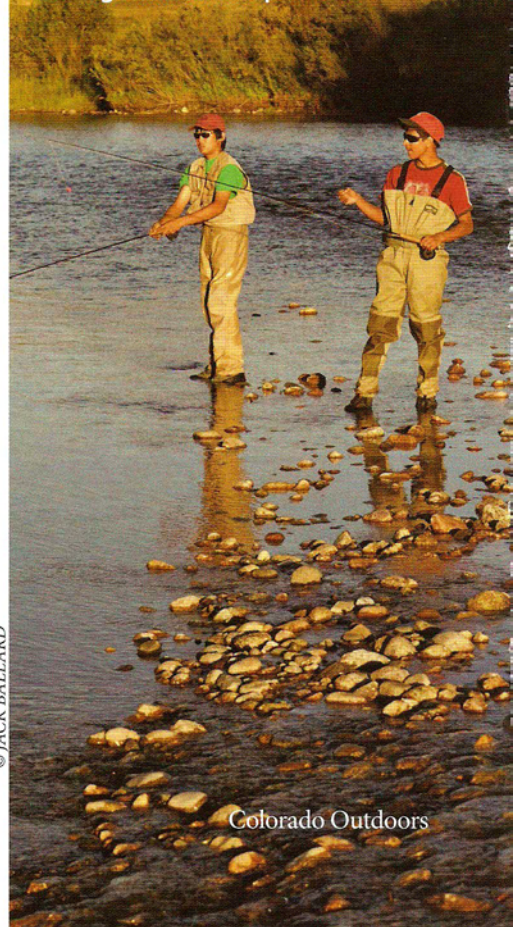
**Eat the fish.** When my youngest boy caught his first rainbow trout at age five, I took a photo of him with his prize, wet my hand then let it go. He started wailing. "Mommy, why did you let our dinner go?"

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I explained that anglers often let fish go so that they'll grow bigger and be even more exciting to catch next time. Even after catching three more trout, he fumed about my releasing that fish for most of the evening. He was supremely proud of providing the fish for dinner, but still rued the one that we could not sample. Looking back I made two mistakes. The second was letting the trout go. The first was picking trout as his target fish. I should have pointed him toward panfish.

Most young children don't understand catch and release. If they go fishing, they expect to eat the fish they catch and are disappointed if they have to let them go. For this reason, panfish, such as bluegills and pumpkinseeds, are perfect species for a 6-year-old to target. The odds are high they'll catch a lot of them, and I would much rather savor the tasty fillets of a panfish than a tasteless trout.

As kids mature, they become more adept at handling fish. Their goals also change from catching fish to eat them to hooking them for the sport of it. When the thrill comes from hooking for sport rather than catching to eat, they are more willing to release whatever wriggles at the end of their line.

**Leave your rod behind.** As much as we love fishing, when we started taking our kids out on the water, we left our rods at home. Without the option of fishing ourselves, we were less frustrated missing the action. More importantly, we gave our undivided attention to our kids. They thrived on our attentiveness. Fishing was fun as much for having mom or dad to themselves as it was for catching fish. It was yet another subliminal way to get them hooked.

Today, all four of our kids are competent casting on their own. We frequently fish as a family, though I still enjoy taking a break from my own rod to watch them reel in fish from a boat or a riverbank. Now as teenagers, they think they know all the nuances of angling and don't need our help any more. I don't mind. I'm proud of them each time they shout, "Fish on!" Despite their desire for independence in other aspects of their lives, they still like to go fishing with their parents. Fishing will be always be our family affair. ∞

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