

They're Hooked!

By Lenny Rudow

Fishing can get a kid hooked on boats forever

Today's generational divide between parents and their kids is as massive as the Atlantic Ocean — and just as fraught with dangers. Luckily, we nautical types have boats on our side. Casting off the lines and setting out on waterborne adventures brings us closer to our kids, providing us with an opportunity to work together and reach common goals. And one of the most popular aquatic adventures for both kids and adults alike is fishing.

Bottom fishing with reliable, easy-to-use spinning gear is a great way to introduce kids to fishing.

More than 48 million Americans enjoy fishing on a regular basis, accounting for a billion-plus outings. About one-fourth of all self-described fishers are under the age of 18, and when it comes to kids in the 6- to 12-year-old age group, almost 80 percent say fishing is fun. But fishing is more than mere amusement; it also promotes good health (nearly 30 percent of those kids say they enjoy fishing for the exercise), encourages environmental stewardship, and teaches the value of patience. Sometimes, we even get a fresh-fish dinner out of the deal. So, what's stopping you from taking your children or grandchildren fishing? Nothing, we hope. But it can be a bit challenging if you're not an experienced angler who's accustomed to honing the experience for youthful boaters. Don't worry — follow these simple guidelines, and you and your kids are bound to get some action on your fishing lines.

Something's Fishy

Taking kids out for a day of fishing is quite different than taking adults. First and foremost, that means dropping the “must catch fish” attitude that many anglers have. Put the kids first, not the activity. Owners of fishing boats such as center consoles, which may give up creature comforts for optimal fishability, may need to do some retrofitting before they take Junior angling.

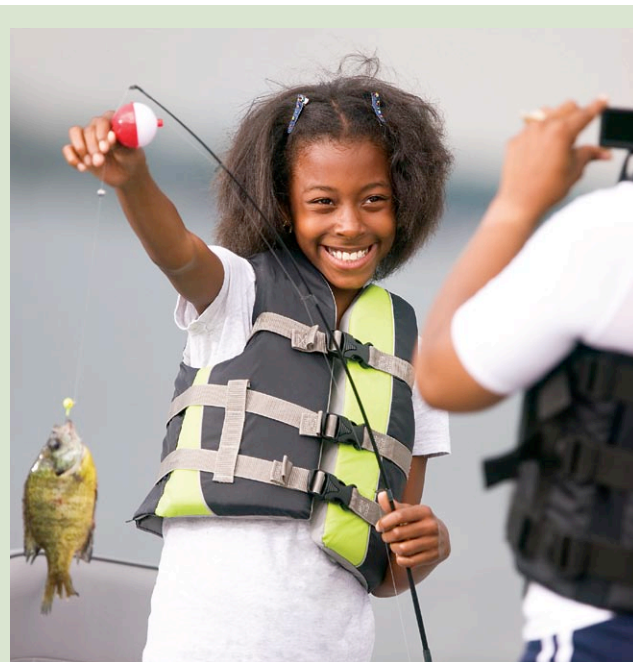
Fishing leads to long stretches of time sitting still in open water, so sun protection is a must. Especially on small, open boats, you'll need some form of shade either from a portable top such as a Taylor Made Anchorshade or a Pro-Techt Mantis® shade, or from a more permanent Bimini top such as Taylor Made BoaTops™. On open boats, excessive heat can also be combated with a misting system, and cabin boaters who don't have air conditioning already will find that the kids are a lot happier if they add a portable unit. You'll also want to make sure you have head facilities available, regardless of what type of boat you're on, or the fishing day is bound to be cut short. Finally, consider your rod holder situation. Kids tend to pick up and put down their fishing rods constantly, and they'll need a secure spot to do so. If you don't already have a good selection of rod holders on your boat, consider adding them; rail mounts (several varieties are available from Smith, Scotty, and West Marine) can be installed in a matter of minutes and get the job done well.

KISS The Fish

No, not on the lips — we're talking about the “K.I.S.S.” method of fishing (Keep It Simple, Stupid). Simplicity is incredibly important because kids get frustrated easily, and if you try to introduce them to complex gear and tactics early in the game, they're likely to become overwhelmed. Kids need fast action to hold their attention, so forms of fishing that target lower numbers of larger-sized fish, such as trolling, can be boring. So, it's usually best to start off kids by bottom fishing for panfish.

No matter where you boat and fish, there are sure to be panfish in the area, usually in large numbers. Better yet, they're also usually willing to bite and, unlike some larger gamefish, panfish aren't too finicky and will usually take a wide range of baits.

In freshwater lakes or rivers, suspend your bait two or three feet below a bobber to catch sunfish, trout, crappie, and bass. Eliminate the float and let your offering sit on bottom, and in most areas catfish can be added to the menu. Worms, minnow, and crayfish are the most common freshwater baits, and with



Combating Boredom

Boredom between bites is the biggest problem you're likely to face when you take kids fishing. But there are a couple of ways you can keep young anglers entertained even when the fishing is slow. If you have a live well on your boat, fill it with minnow or any small fish you may have caught earlier in the day. Secure the top open, and kids will have a great time playing in the “hands-on” aquarium you've just created. There's no live well on *Mom's Mink*? Get a portable model or simply bring along a five-gallon bucket and a battery-operated aerator (see the May issue for details).

Another great form of entertainment for fishing kids is your boat's fishfinder. When the bite is slow, park Junior in front of your fishfinder and ask him to give a shout whenever fish swim below the boat. There aren't any fish on-screen at the moment? Turn the sensitivity setting to manual, and raise it until you see a few false echoes.

Finally, you can come prepared to combat boredom by buying a few bags of different-colored soft-plastic lures (without hooks, of course) and mixing them together. Dump them out onto the deck, hand your kid several different plastic baggies, and ask him or her to help you sort them out. Offer up a plastic squid or crab as a reward for their help, and they should have plenty of motivation.

FYFI (For Your Fishing Info)

Check out www.takemefishing.org. This website, operated by the not-for-profit Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation, has information on opportunities for anglers of all ages. In it, you can find guides to different species of fish and when and where to catch them; links to government websites where you can buy state fishing licenses; basic knot-tying and gear guides; even selections of interactive fishing games and links to websites that are designed for kids who enjoy fishing and boating.

good reason: Most of these fish will eat most of them, most of the time. When fishing with worms, thread them onto the hook so they cover it up, and bait minnow by putting the hooks in through the lower jaw and out through the upper jaw. Crayfish can be hooked right through the tail. In areas with stocked trout, consider using artificial trout bait, which has a dough-like consistency and can be molded around the hook.

If using worms or minnows is in the cards, buy them at a local tackle shop, but the kids will probably enjoy catching their own bait. Turn over rocks or dig in the garden for worms, or arm your children with small-mesh dip nets — the live-well found at boating supply stores and tackle shops are perfect — and let them run through the shallows, scooping up baits.

In northern and mid-Atlantic saltwater bays and creeks, use double-hook “bottom rigs” weighted with a one-ounce sinker and baited with Fishbites (artificial bait that is very effective, and is readily available at most boating or fishing supply stores), shrimp, sandworms, or minnow. You’ll be likely to catch fish such as perch, spot, sea bass, croaker, porgy, and the odd striped bass or flounder. Southern anglers can use these same baits to catch pompano, speckled sea trout, grunts, and snappers. On the West Coast, squid is a staple when fishing for panfish, such as corbina, perch, and jacksmelt.

Of course, you’ll want to be prepared just in case a larger fish gets on the line. Whenever you’re in areas where fish heavier than 10 pounds might strike, haul along a portable fighting chair such as the B & M Quad Base, or the Todd Pro Strike Fisherman Chair, which has a gimbal where you can rest the rod butt. This will help young anglers bear the weight of the gear and the fish for extended “battles.”

A Positive Spin

Providing young anglers with easy-to-use but reliable gear is a key factor. Many inexpensive push-button (spin cast) or spinning reels cause the fishing line to tangle easily; they corrode the first time they’re exposed to saltwater and break quickly. So when you first gear up, make sure you don’t buy the cheapest combo on the store shelf.

Expect to pay \$50 to \$100 for a reasonably reliable set of spinning gear, which is the easiest type for most kids to master and can be used for both bait and lure fishing. Some good starter combos that can be used for small- to medium-sized gamefish up to about 10 pounds include the Penn Captiva CV2400 (\$79.99), the Pflueger Trio Spin Combo (\$59.99), and the Shakespeare Ugly Stik® Spinning Combo (\$69.99); the latter is particularly good for accident-prone kids, because the rod is more or less indestructible. All of these combos come pre-spoiled with line on the reel, so they’re ready to use.

There’s one other item you may want to consider bringing along when you take kids fishing on your boat: a rail-mounted grill. Cook your catch on the spot, and it completes the adventure — giving you and your kids an unmistakable reward for fulfilling your fishing goals.

Lenny Rudow has been a writer and editor in the marine field for two decades and has authored five how-to fishing books including Rudow’s Guide To Rockfish and Rudow’s Guide To Modern Jigging, available at www.GETGUP.com. He’s won 18 awards from Boating Writers International and two from the Outdoor Writers Association of America.



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