



A basic guide to taking kids fishing (for adults who don't have a clue).

LET'S GO CATCH SOME FISH!

BY DAVE HAGENGRUBER

One of life's simplest—and least expensive—joys is to spend a day fishing with friends or family. You get to be outside, enjoy the natural world, and maybe even hook a fish or two. Fishing is especially fun for kids. They love learning to cast, exploring the shoreline, and seeing birds and other wildlife near the water. And if they catch fish, get ready for some major noise. There are few sounds more exciting—to kids or to parents—than “Mom! Dad! I *got* one!”

Fishing also offers kids time away from television, computers, and cell phones. It takes

them to places where family members can talk without distraction, or just sit quietly and enjoy the silence together. Kids learn a lot more than how to tie a knot or cast a line. By fishing, they develop patience, problem-solving skills, and an awareness and appreciation for the natural world.

Unfortunately, many parents don't know much about fishing. That makes it difficult to introduce kids to the sport. Going fishing isn't as convenient as walking down to the playground and kicking a soccer ball around. But it's also not nearly as difficult as it looks. Over the years I've taken thousands of school kids fishing. By following the tips provided here, you and your kids

can be fishing this weekend—and having a great time doing it.

MAKE A PLAN

Step one is to figure out where to fish. That determines everything else, from the gear you'll need to the likelihood of catching something. Look for a pond where you can catch sunfish or stocked trout from shore. Fish size or species is not a big deal to kids, at least when they are first learning. They enjoy catching a dozen tiny sunfish or perch in an hour far more than spending the entire day trying to catch just one big fish. Sure, lunker walleyes and trout are glamorous, but to a beginner, any fish is a good fish.

WAY COOL Kids love to fish. And they love it when adults take them along and show them how. Even if you don't know a thing about fishing, by following a few easy guidelines you can have your kids or grandkids rigged and ready to go by this weekend.

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THE ESSENTIAL KNOT

To attach a hook or lure to the fishing line so it doesn't come off, you need to use a clinch knot. It's easy to tie:



(1) Thread the line through the eye of the hook. (2) Wrap the end around the taut line five complete turns. (3) Pass the end back through the loop next to the eye. Pull tight and trim the excess.

Ask friends and co-workers for advice on kid-friendly waters where a youngster has a decent chance of catching fish. A few towns have Children's Fishing Waters. Biologists with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manage these ponds to provide fishing opportunities for young anglers. Find a list on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishing/fishingmontana/fishingponds.html>. Also, check FWP's on-line Fishing Access Guide to find the closest lakes or ponds. Or call the nearest FWP office and ask a fisheries biologist or game warden what local waters might work best.

Try to stay close to home. When your fishing spots are nearby, your kids have more opportunities to go fishing.

Schedule fishing trips for when fish are most active. In spring and fall, fish tend to bite almost any time of day. But in summer, plan to fish in the morning and evening, when cooler temperatures and lower light levels stimulate feeding behavior.

GEAR UP

You can outfit a kid with everything necessary to catch fish for less than \$25. Go to a local bait shop or sporting goods store on a weeknight when the staff isn't as busy and has more time to answer questions. Tell the salesperson you want a beginner's spin-casting outfit and related gear (see sidebar on page 28 for illustrations and descriptions).

Nothing catches fish better than live bait such as a worm, grasshopper, or half a night crawler on a small hook suspended below a bobber. (And kids love watching bobbers float on the surface.) Pick up a carton or two of bait from a local fishing shop. Or dig worms from the backyard or catch 'hoppers in grassy fields in late summer. Many kids like collecting bait as much as fishing.

STAY ON SHORE

The best place to introduce kids to fishing is

Dave Hagenruber coordinates the FWP Angler Education Program.

Every fishing trip can be an opportunity for discovering something new about the natural world.

from shore. They have more room to move around, and everyone has easier access to restrooms, drinking water, and your vehicle. It may seem like every Montana angler fishes from a boat, raft, or canoe, but you don't need them to catch fish.

The trick to shore fishing is to not stay in one place too long. Fish are relatively stationary. They won't come to you; you have to find them. Move along the shoreline trying new areas until you find where fish are biting. If the weather is warm enough, wear old tennis shoes, shorts, and a life jacket and wade in shallow water along shore. That helps you cast farther into the pond.

To find fish, learn to think like a fish. Besides finding enough food to survive,

a fish's main concern is to avoid being eaten by predators. Cast to deep water near rocks, logs, and weedbeds, where fish feed while hiding from herons and ospreys. Fish avoid shallow water off sandy beaches because they are too exposed, which is why you rarely catch fish in swimming areas.

HELP, BUT NOT TOO MUCH

I've seen too many parents spoil a family fishing trip by "taking over" when their kid is having trouble casting. The adult commandeers the rod and reel and spends the next hour doing all the fishing while the child sits there, bored. Find a balance between offering enough help so the trip is a success, but not so much that you do all the fishing. After showing your kids the basics, back off a bit while they figure things out for themselves. Let kids know you are there to help—but only if they need it.

ENJOY THE SURROUNDINGS

Don't get so caught up in the fishing itself that you and your kids miss other attractions. Show them the different bird species—such as kingfishers, herons, ospreys, and ducks— attracted to ponds and streams. Let your kids catch turtles and frogs in the shallow water. Or turn over rocks to find bugs and crayfish.



BETTER THAN XBOX Can't pry your kids from the electronic game console? Take them fishing—the ultimate reality game. Top left: Catching a trout can even pump up your pre-teens. Top right: Though kids generally have short attention spans, you'll be amazed at how long they can stare at a bobber. Above left and right: Kids don't need to catch lunkers to have fun. To beginners, any fish is a good fish.

Sure, all that splashing might scare fish. But so what? It's still fun.

If you return to a fishing spot several times during the year, point out where reeds and other plants along shore have grown taller as the summer progresses. Talk about cottonwood leaves turning yellow in late summer, or how creek and pond levels rise and fall

with the seasons. Every fishing trip can be an opportunity for discovering something new about the natural world.

HAVE A PICNIC

Food and drinks are essential for a successful fishing trip. A simple picnic lunch outdoors can be as much fun as the fishing.

KEEP TRIPS SHORT

Kids have short attention spans—even when fishing. It's always better to cut the trip short and leave kids wanting more than to stay too long and hear the dreaded, "We're bored!"

PLAN FOR THE CATCH

Kids love to look at pictures of themselves

Basic fishing gear

To take a kid fishing, you'll want to become familiar with this fundamental gear:

Note: This equipment is for what's known as spin fishing. In spin fishing, you cast a lure or a baited hook. The weight of the lure or bait allows you to cast far into the water. Spin fishing is different from fly fishing, in which you cast a tiny fly that's light as a feather using a completely different type of rod, reel, and line. Look for information on fly fishing basics in a future issue of Montana Outdoors.

Montana Fishing Regulations:

Includes the laws all anglers must follow and lists fishing waters throughout Montana. Find the regulations at sporting goods stores, fly shops, FWP offices, and on-line at fwp.mt.gov.

Fishing licenses:

Kids under age 12 do not need any type of license. See the FWP website for requirements for older children and adults.

Personal Flotation Device

(also known as a PFD or life vest): Required for everyone when in a boat, regardless of age. Kids age 12 and younger must wear one while in a boat and should wear one when near water. Older kids and adults should consider wearing one when wading.



reel (which sits below the rod handle, unlike the spin-cast reel, which sits on the rod handle).

Rod: Short rods 4 to 5 feet long are generally easier for kids to handle than longer rods.



Line: Line is sold according to its strength (called "test"), ranging from 2-pound test up to more than 30-pound test. A good all-purpose line is 6-pound-test clear monofilament.

Hooks: If you use bait, you'll need hooks. The smaller the number, the larger the hook. Smaller size 8 hooks are best for trout, sunfish, and carp. Larger size 4 and 6 hooks are good for walleyes, bass, and catfish. "Bait-holder" hooks have small barbs on the shank that keep worms or other bait from slipping off.

Sinkers: These weights keep your bait down near the bottom of the pond or stream,

where most fish swim. Split-shot sinkers have a split down the middle that allows you to pinch it (with pliers) onto the line, usually about 12 inches up from the bait.

Bobbers: These are made of plastic or foam and keep your bait at a certain depth. They also let you know when a fish has grabbed the bait. A bobber adds weight to the line to help you cast farther.

Lures and bait.

Spinners: Spinners have a metal blade that spins around a central metal shaft. The flash of the spinner resembles a minnow.

Use a small snap-swivel between the line and the spinner to keep the line from twisting. Spinners are great for any type of fish. Use smaller versions for trout and sunfish and larger ones for walleyes and bass.

Crankbaits: These imitate minnows. The lip on the front



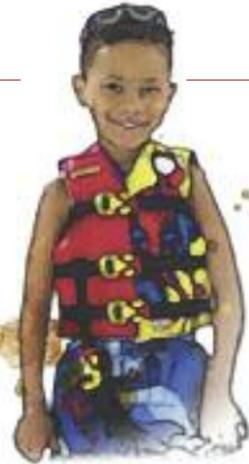
Other handy items:

- plastic tacklebox to store fishing gear
- stringer to keep your catch fresh in the water
- hand towel for wiping slime off your hands or your kids' hands after handling fish
- needle-nosed pliers for unhooking fish and

- crimping split-shot
- first-aid kit
- drinking water
- fingernail clippers to cut line and trim knots



ILLUSTRATIONS BY RON FINGER/REDPINE STUDIO



I DID IT! Help out, but not too much. Find a balance between offering some assistance (above: netting a trout) without taking over. You'll be surprised at what kids can do on their own when given half a chance—like hooking and landing a nice largemouth bass (below).

holding their catch, so always take photographs. Many kids also like to eat their catch. If you plan to keep some for a meal, bring along a small cooler and ice. Clean the fish quickly, get them on ice, and try to eat your catch that same evening. Fish taste best when both the meat and the memories are still fresh. If you choose to release fish, be sure to let your child help put them back in the water.

BE SAFE

Fishing is fun, but it involves hooks and water, so safety is always a top concern. Bring a life jacket for each child—even when shore fishing. Also, bring sunscreen and brimmed hats, as well as sunglasses for eye protection (polarized sunglasses also



help you see fish in the water.) Don't worry if you don't catch fish, because it happens, even to experienced adult anglers. The day can still be successful. Kids can have plenty of fun skipping rocks or looking for frogs. Maybe they'll see a bald eagle soar overhead or a mink scamper along the bank. Or they finally learn how to cast, or they tie their first clinch knot. It's not always easy to take kids fishing. I've seen more than my share of tangled lines, spilled tackle boxes, and broken rod tips. But it's always rewarding. By introducing kids to fishing, you can instill a lifelong love of the sport and a desire to help protect and conserve Montana's lakes and streams. Just as important, you'll create memories your family can share for years to come.