

Teaching Kids to Fish

When adult anglers offer a sense of humor, kids take the bait.

By C.B. Bylander¹

My dad was something else.

He would lie, exaggerate, and spin yarns as tangled as a backlash. All kids should be so lucky. Most don't get to fish with the perfect mentor.

Dad was perfect because he had so many skills. He could cast a mile, detect a bite without a bobber, and unhook lures—usually mine—from pants, props, and other places where fish don't bite, including trees way up on shore. He was an angler's angler. He could catch fish even when his cronies couldn't (though his cronies were often inside the cabin, trying to catch a straight or full house).

Dad followed the law. He was a school principal and an ex-Marine. Rules were his world. Repetition too. He taught me to cast where he cast, to reel like he reeled, to thread live bait onto a hook just the way he did. And when fishing stunk, he repeated the same old tricks to keep my spirits up and his bait down in the lake. The tricks usually involved the discovery of a Milky Way bar in his coat pocket or a far-fetched answer to a simple question.

The first fishing question I recall asking Dad was, "Why do we have a net in the boat?"

"That's simple," he replied. "If someone forgets their rod, they dunk the net in the lake and wait for a fish to swim into it."

I believed him. I tried it. I didn't catch a fish. Yet I suppose that was the point. I learned. He fished. And throughout the day we dropped crappies and bluegills into a wire fish basket that dangled from the gunwale of the boat. Those were the days.

I offer these reflections because, unfortunately, many adults today don't have a clue about how to take a kid fishing. Yes, they might be able to bait co-workers into doing their work, hook bargains on eBay, or even land real estate deals without breaking a sweat. But how many know what it takes to spark a child's interest in fishing and sustain it for a lifetime?



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To remedy this situation, I offer Dad's secrets. They are as timeless as waves lapping at the shore. They worked for Dad. They work for me. They can work for you too.

1. GET ORGANIZED.

The first prerequisite to taking a kid fishing is to thoroughly examine every plug, spoon, jig, sinker, and hook in your tackle box. Next, arrange each in descending order of fish-catching prowess. If you need to buy something, do it. Once you have completed this task, store your tackle box in a safe place and go buy a carton of worms. Heck, you're just fishing with a kid. Start simple. Don't overwhelm the tot. All you need is a little live bait and patience. However, you will be prepared the next time an adult asks you to go fishing.

2. BUY AGE-APPROPRIATE TACKLE.

Fishing tackle has become increasingly sophisticated. Reels are smaller. Line is thinner. Retrieve ratios are higher. It is all pretty exciting, especially for kids who love gizmos and the magic of moving parts. Still, I've found that a telescopic cane pole, a pencil-shaped bobber, one split shot, and a tiny hook combine to make the perfect panfish rig. The cane pole is simple, inexpensive, and elegant in an old-fashioned way. So buy one. You'll love it. And after your child has buggy-whipped your high-tech rod and reel into a monofilament mess that Houdini couldn't untangle (kids always want to fish with your gear first) you can share the cane pole. It will be fun.

3. THINK SAFETY.

Fishing is safe. Still, there are dangers. Think about it. Metal hooks hurtling through the air. Fish with teeth as sharp as needles. Fins with skin-piercing spines. Deep water. Moving currents. So, protect yourself from your kid. You're likely to get hurt if you don't. I always bring life jackets, needle-nosed pliers, Band-Aids, and a handkerchief for tears. Band-Aids are good because occasionally a child gets hurt while frantically directing you to bait a hook, remove a fish, or dive for one of your favorite possessions as it sinks to the bottom of the lake.

4. BRING FOOD.

No fishing trip is complete without a sumptuous repast. Therefore, I always pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, chocolate milk, Oreo cookies, Fritos, and a handful of Hershey's Kisses. It's the perfect meal. Kids usually like it too.

5. INSTILL ADVENTURE.

Fishing should be exciting, or at least less dreary than a trip to the dentist. An easy way to instill adventure is to make up extraordinary names for ordinary places. A small inlet, for example, can be dubbed Big Bass Bay once you've caught a bass in it. Islands can be given mysterious and interesting names. I lean toward appellations such as Calling Loon, Echo Point, Hidden Bar, and Skinny Dipper, the latter having a sort of whimsical yet scandalous air about it. Name every place a kid catches a fish. In fact, kids like this so much they will soon start to name places of their own. My firstborn son, for example, often likes to fish at "Where'd That Stump Come From" Narrows, "Out of Gas? How Can We Be Out of Gas?" Bay, and "Cripes, That's Gonna Be Expensive" Rock Pile (the latter an ancient stretch of structure that inexplicably shifted 500 feet to the north since the last time I fished it).

6. IMPART WISDOM.

There is no greater angling responsibility than to provide information to the next generation, especially accurate information. Therefore, be a student of nature. Or, be a creator of your own scientific theories. Either is good. Both are entertaining. The latter is common among anglers who have caught too few fish and too many rays in the sun.

For example, a child might ask, "Why do catfish have whiskers?" Whereas an ichthyologist would impart wisdom by simply stating that whiskers-called barbels-allow the fish to taste food, you, on the other hand, are free to leap to far-fetched conclusions. The catfish, you can say, is actually leading an evolutionary change that might someday extend to humans. And when it does, children will have whiskers dangling from their faces and thereby be able to try new foods without having to put them into their mouth.

7. INVENT DISTRACTIONS.

Unlike adults, who can enjoy a picturesque lake view for hours on end, kids have minnow-sized attention spans. This is a problem. In fact, it can be a big problem. Short attention spans can be especially irritating when you have readied the boat, gassed the truck, bought worms, driven to the lake, launched the boat, parked the truck, found the perfect fishing spot, dropped anchor, baited hooks, helped the kids get their lines in the lake, and then-just as you reach for your own fishing rod-you hear a soft voice declare, "I want to go home."

So bring minnows. Kids love to sort them and count them, and will spend a long time finding just the right one for you. Minnows are a sound investment because they can delay the sound of "I wanna go home" for hours, especially if the minnows actually catch fish. Other good distractions include binoculars, bird guides, a tackle box you want reorganized, and anything that can be lost, broken, or otherwise devalued without misery to a child. Or you.

8. BUILD MEMORIES.

At its heart, fishing is about memories. So make them. Rise early. Fish late. Travel to distant places. Stay close to home. Do whatever you like. It doesn't matter. Just fish. Wonderful memories will be formed when you do.

Kids will forever recall the fight of a big fish, the scent of shore lunch sizzling in a pan, or the daft look on their dad's face when he realized the boat was "setting funny" in the lake because the drain plug was still in his pocket.

And if you don't have kids of your own, invite the child of a neighbor or friend. They could use a mentor, even if you don't lie, exaggerate, and make up silly stories.

So there you have it. Those are fishing lessons from a dad. Make of them what you want. But I contend they will serve you well when combined with fishing tips found in magazines and books. With luck, I'll see you on the water this summer. I'll be the guy with the cane pole, chocolate milk, and Oreo cookies mentoring the 4-year-old boy who is my son. And if you happen to see him dunking a net in the lake for no good purpose, rest assured there is one . . . the fish are biting and Dad's not yet ready to go home.

Starters for Fishing

Taking a kid fishing certainly can be the stuff of memories. But what if you don't know a spin caster from spinner bait? Take heart. Help is available from the DNR.

Since it began in 1989, the DNR MinnAqua program has introduced 400,000 people-mostly youth-to Minnesotans' favorite pastime. MinnAqua aims to help people learn about lake and stream ecology by teaching them how to fish.

Any organization in the state, from scout troops to 4-H clubs to local parks and recreation departments, may schedule a MinnAqua fishing clinic for youngsters as well as parents and other adult mentors. Participants get hands-on instruction in angling techniques in addition to an introduction to aquatic habitats and ecosystems.

In the seven-county Twin Cities metro region, the DNR Fishing in the Neighborhood program provides local opportunities for fishing by installing piers and other structures for shore fishing. FiN also stocks 34 "kids' fishing ponds" so urban anglers without a boat can enjoy their sport close to home.

Why not get started on Take A Kid Fishing Weekend-June 11-13? Any adult fishing with a child younger than 16 in Minnesota that weekend may fish without a license.

To learn more about MinnAqua, FiN, or Take A Kid Fishing events happening in your neighborhood this spring and summer, contact the DNR Information Center or go online to: [MinnAqua](#) or [FiN](#).

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