

Conservation

SETTING THE HOOK FOR LIFE

If children learn to love and respect fishing, they will protect its future.

By Don Vachini

WEARING TATTERED PANTS and a good portion of streamside dirt, the 5-year-old boy triumphantly held a scrawny rainbow trout aloft. Framed in freckles, his ear to ear grin told the story. Kneeling next to him, his father swelled with pride as he handed out congratulatory pats and praises. For all practical purposes the trout could have been seven pounds instead of seven inches.

Just the other day, I watched this same "kid," now 22, display his trademark smile as he skillfully played, netted and released a stocky, one-pound rainbow. Though outward expressions were a little more subdued, it was obvious both father and son still enjoyed a common bond.

Over the past 17 years, I've shared numerous fishing experiences with my daughter and three sons, visiting waters both near and far. Throughout these adventures, we have not only honed our angling skills and become close angling buddies but solved many of life's problems as well. Advice on money matters, school problems, the environment, politics, sex, sports and drugs are among some of the topics discussed openly and freely along

lakeshores and streamside campfires. There is no doubt in my mind that our fishing excursions have greatly improved family communications. Somehow, for our family, fishing and the outdoor elements that go along with it, seem to strengthen family ties. If for no other reason than this, introducing one's offspring to fishing can be a lifelong reward for all parties!

Personally, I cannot think of a finer gift than sharing angling traditions with our children. Youngsters, especially in their early years, are naturally inquisitive and eager to sample new horizons, making them perfect models for instruction. However, in order to turn kids on to fishing, one must use a little strategy, otherwise the results can be disastrous. In planning the young one's initial ventures, which are crucial to the long range outcome, psychology, common sense and patience all come into play.

Although the age to begin instruction varies depending on the individual situation, the earlier the better is the general rule. My children all began between 4 and 5 and were fairly self-sufficient by age 7.

Of primary importance in these early sessions is that the child enjoy a positive experience, necessary to stimulate future interest. In plain words, this means catching fish. To facilitate this, target an easy-to-catch species (sunfish, catfish, planted trout, etc.) with the potential for rapid action and high success. Contact local Fish and Game offices to get suggestions on hotspots near home. Though both county and municipal lakes are good first choices, farm ponds probably offer the best bet, since the quarry need not be large, just

willing. Irvine Lake and Santa Ana River Lakes in Orange County would be excellent choices for the Southern California angler, while numerous municipal lakes in the Bay Area



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We must, as adults, take our kids fishing in order to preserve our sport for future generations.

offer fine put-and-take fishing opportunities.

Sometimes it is even feasible to visit a fish farm where the few dollars spent is worth the torrid action. Party boat trips, where catch rates are usually high, remains another possibility for the saltwater enthusiast. Try to schedule the initial outing during mid-week when loads are light. Try a half-day excursion instead of a full-day trip — kids tire easily and can become bored quickly.

It is important to focus your attention totally on the child and not try to sneak in some fishing time yourself. Continually build their confidence by insuring action. If they are real young, holding the rod together is recommended but let the child play and land the fish alone. With my children, I used to quietly and inconspicuously set the hook, relax pressure and then pretend to have to go to the bathroom, handing them the rod. Watching

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from the bushes, I would return just as they were fighting or landing the fish and make a big deal about how well they did on their own.

Although proper functioning tackle is essential, I favor the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle. While the old cane pole and bobber works well, I have found a small, light spinning rod and reel with 2- to 44 pound test line to be the best overall choice for beginners. Several inexpensive but reliable brands can easily be acquired. Today's packaged rod/reel combos are available for a great price.

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A few practice sessions to master the coordination of casting are usually beneficial. Remember to keep the instructions simple and the distances short. I used to set up a garbage can lid on my lawn as a target and let my kids try to hit it. As they became more proficient, kneeling and sitting positions became added challenges.

When dealing with hooks, there is always a certain danger, so be sure to stress safety. Have them look around to be sure they are clear before casting. Flattening barbs allows for easy removal from clothes (and skin).

Be prepared to tie their knots and bait their hooks at first. Also expect line tangles, clumsy mistakes, lost fish and getting wet or dirty as part of the game. Try to remain cheerful and optimistic at these times (we're supposed to be having fun, right?).

Allow them to keep their catches no matter how small. There is no greater confidence builder than carrying their stringer of fish back home or through camp. The fact that other people see their catch does wonders for their young, developing egos. Also, take and display photos of their catch. Our refrigerator was constantly adorned with memorable shots which were always pointed out to guests with pride.

From a youngster's standpoint, baiting a worm on a hook and cleaning the catch are probably the most unpleasant aspects of angling. Take the time to patiently instruct the child on both endeavors. When they seem physically capable and not sooner, have them try it on their own. Trout are the easiest to

clean; panfish and catfish the most difficult.

Keep the early trips well within the young one's tolerance range. An hour or two is more than adequate, especially for the 4-5 year-olds. On the way home, treat them to an ice cream or meal. While eating, reinforce the day's accomplishments, thus making it a special time to remember.

Once kindled, care must be taken to maintain this interest. Make the time to frequently go on short forays and continue to focus on the child. Small, low-key challenges or competitions add zest to the venture. First fish, most fish and biggest fish contests were very popular among my children, especially in their younger years. However, make sure these wagers remain low-key. A food-oriented prize is very appropriate.

As the child grows older and interest mounts, the game plan changes a bit. Plan well-rounded itineraries to possibly include camping, swimming, sightseeing and campfire games besides fishing. When camping, my children and I used to go on nature hikes or bird watching capped off by a mid-afternoon swim. Boredom comes easy to children, so be aware of any signs of mounting drudgery, and devise appropriate, spur-of-the-moment plots to ease this situation. Though not recommended to improve the fishing, throwing a stick in the water and having the kids toss rocks at it usually increases marksmanship and helps burn off some energy. Collecting firewood and firestarting responsibilities were usually winners among my children.

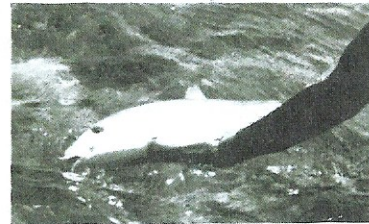
Occasionally let the child bring along a friend. Several of my son's companions became avid anglers along with my children. Most still visit or join us on occasions. They all reminisce about their younger days with pride. It's funny how their fish grow with age!

Obviously, the more a kid fishes the more proficient he or she becomes. As the situation warrants, introduce the child to more advanced equipment and techniques. Christmas and birthdays provide good excuses to step-up tackle, but if the time is right, don't hesitate. Incidentally, I favor a fishing vest over a tackle box. All necessary equipment can be carried efficiently and organized while leaving both hands free.

Currently many sport shops offer a plethora of instructional videos for rent or sale, while some local organizations even offer free in-

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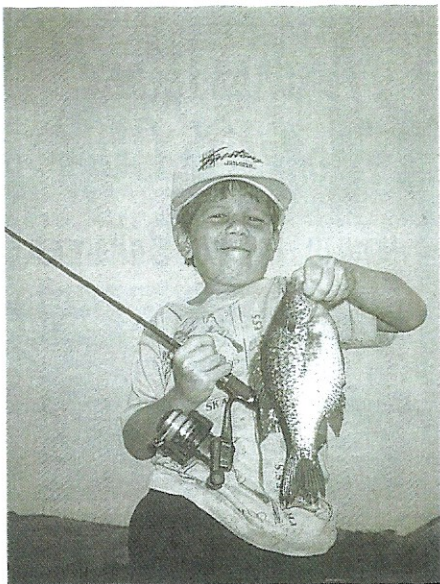
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Young Matthew Grace of El Toro caught and released this bluegill on a spinner at Oso Reservoir in Orange County.

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possible, get the child interested in area sports clubs or organizations such as local chapters of Trout Unlimited, Cal Trout, Inc., and the United Anglers of California. Many of these have youth groups as part of their makeup. Besides fishing outings and other fun events, they are active in stream cleanup and habitat enhancement projects which help foster a better understanding of the fishing environment.

The example parents or adults demonstrate has a huge influence on the overall mannerisms the youth will eventually exhibit. It is not always easy to be on guard and take the time to explain why you did or didn't do something, but the overall results will usually reflect the positive. I always stressed the importance of angling etiquette to my children. Often we would bypass prime waters which already had an angler or two working it. Using role reversal, I asked my kids how they would feel if we were fishing the hole and three people burst right in on top of us, destroying our solitude.

I also encouraged my children to not only police their own messes but others' garbage as

well. Following my lead, they would often come back to camp with vests containing bits of litter discarded by others. While my three boys are all in their 20's now, they still perform this deed by habit.

As my children progressed, I made sure they ate whatever fish they killed. While we always managed to have enough to fry, my little ones practiced catch and release from an early age on, probably because I did too. On many occasions I watched older anglers gaze in amazement as one of my offspring matter-of-factly released a nice fish, the warm feeling in my chest telling me I had shared my sport well with my children.

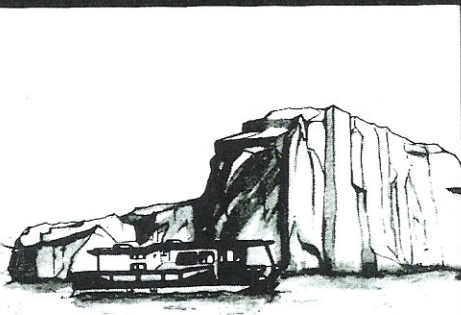
There is no doubt that fishing can be enjoyed for many different reasons, at various levels of competency and by all ages. With careful planning and dedication, we can set the hook for life in our children, bestowing upon them a gift of undetermined value while possibly enriching the sport of angling for the future.



structions at community pools or ponds. Some may wish to take advantage of fishing seminars, available for a nominal fee.

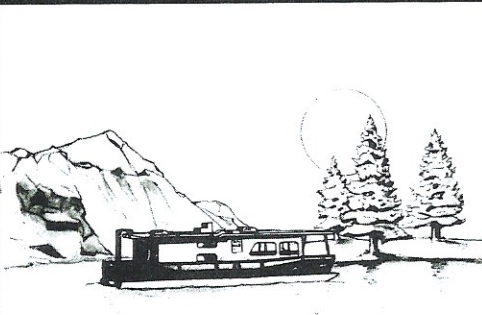
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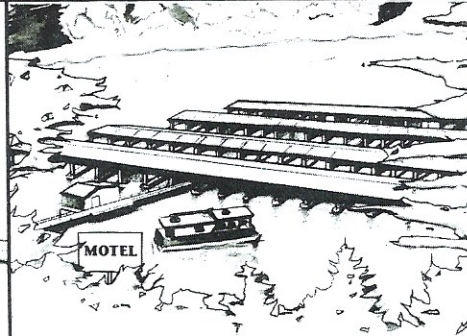
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