

From the Creel

Catching the Bug

Introducing the World of Fly Fishing to Youngsters

By Jake Smith

A kid's first fish on a fly rod—one he or she cast for, hooked, and fought—is a memory-bank milestone, if not for the kid, then for the adult who introduced this grand world to the youngster. That's why I nearly dunked myself trying to land my son Pete's first fish. The ensuing chaos amid shouts of "Strip the line faster!" and "Rod tip up!" and "Get it, Dad!" resembled a Marvel's Avengers fight scene more than an idyllic fishing adventure. Twelve years old at the time, Pete watched in wonder as I gingerly handed him his little bass so he could release it, and I knew in that moment that the lightning bolt delivered by the fight on the delicate rod tingled all the way down to his toes.

Yep, the best place to expose kids to the world of fly fishing is on a pond full of hungry bass and bluegills. A bass/bluegill pond eliminates the worry of staying upright in the current, removes nearly all snags, and provides cooperative fish willing to forgive most amateur mistakes. Those are the three secrets to dealing with kids (and puppies) when introducing them to something new: eliminate stress, diminish opportunities for failure, and provide opportunities for success.

Providing positive introductory experiences for kids to this great big world of fly fishing begins by reminding them that it's simply part of an even larger world: fishing. You want them (and I hope you'll forgive my laziness in using

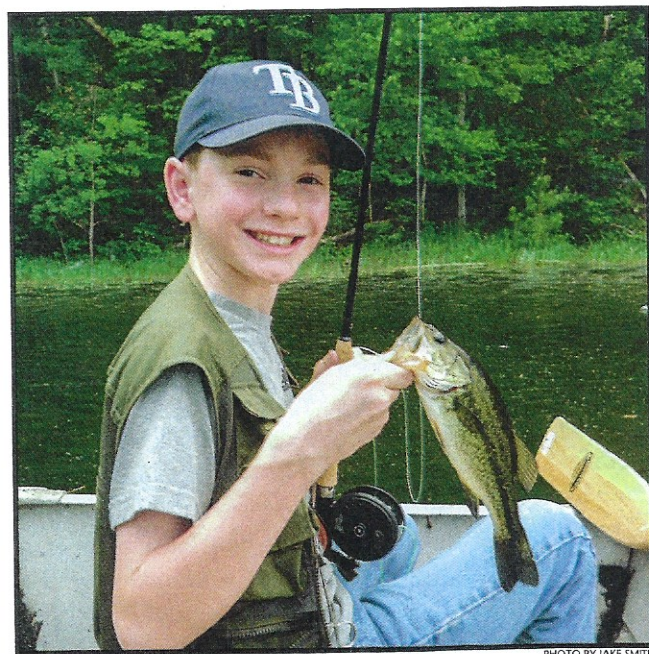


PHOTO BY JAKE SMITH

The author's son, Pete, shows off his first fish on a fly rod, a hungry bass. Bluegills and bass are great fish for budding young fly anglers.



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Ten-year-old Cali Fogg, outdoor writer Don Vachini's granddaughter, is all smiles with a fly-caught bluegill. Warm-water species such as bass and sunfish are ideal for teaching kids the basics of fly fishing.

the ubiquitous "them" and "they" to refer to a singular youngster) to fall in love with fishing. Anytime a child begins a new endeavor, early success breeds excitement. And when working with kids, make no mistake: success equals fish hooked and landed. Only when kids are older do they cherish the success measured in fishing's solitude and silence or in the craft (fine fly rods, tying your own flies, the execution of the hunt for big fish). So keep in mind that the goal of all of this is to maintain enthusiasm for fishing and the outdoors first; the curiosity and eagerness for fly fishing will develop from that.

On the Water

What's the playbook for early fly-fishing adventures? Here's some advice gleaned from what I've done and am still doing with my three kids on the bass and bluegill pond, starting when they've reached the age of about 8.

Begin on a dock with sure footing and, hopefully, some bluegill beds within about 20 feet. Small bass might be cruising around, too. Once those fish are exercised, move to a sturdy boat so you can get into some better spots. A boat will throw in the difficulty of dealing with the wind,

as well as hooks zinging dangerously close to ears. Eye protection for all concerned is mandatory, and take only one child in the boat at a time, with all necessary PFDs worn.

Bring along a spinning rod. Remember, this is about maintaining interest in fishing, not just fly fishing. If the wind kicks up, the casting is going nowhere, the bluegills aren't hungry for rubber spiders or poppers, or the kid's having a bad day, put away the fly rod and start dunking worms. While the kid is watching the bobber, make some casts with the fly rod; if you're hooking bluegills while the bobber remains lifeless, they'll ask to try again.

When you do cast and hook a couple yourself, let the child fight and land the fish. Their eyes will widen at the difference of the fight on a 3-ounce rod compared to heavier spinning gear.

You're going to need a boatful of patience. Untangling knots, tying on hooks, replacing spiders and poppers—



PHOTO BY JAKE SMITH

Off the water, fly tying is a wonderful way to get kids into the game. And who knows—after a couple of years, you might not need to tie your own flies any longer.

none of those will test your patience more than seeing your child miss hit after hit after hit. Be their cheerleader. Keep encouraging them. Eventually, a bluegill will inhale the fly and hook itself. Skip trying to teach them how to tie knots while in the boat and on the water—assume all responsibility for flies, leaders, and tippet. Practice those knots with twine and an eyebolt in the garage wall later.

Carry a first-aid kit. You both will likely get hooked or spined. Deal with it and move

on. Wear any wound like a badge.

Make a big deal out of small fish. Nothing crushes a child's pride more than "That's it? Where's his big brother?" when they hold up



PHOTO BY JAKE SMITH

Let kids help with everything—even the rowing. It's a fun way to end the trip, with both of you laughing at turning in circles. Here, the author's daughter, Maddie, handles the oars.



PHOTO BY DON VACHINI

Emma Fogg (left) and her sister, Cali, try to decide on a suitable fly, probably one to match their bright clothing. At this stage of their lives, fly color and sparkle trump sophisticated patterns.

their catch—even if you're joking. Just don't. Every catch is a success. And don't fling the fish overboard or toss it in the bucket. Admire the colors, the fins, the eyes, the gills, everything. Demonstrate how to hold and gently release it. This sense of wonder and gratitude at being able to hold a wild animal is too lacking in outdoor pursuits. Big or small, keeper or not, each catch deserves to be celebrated.

Photos! Take your phone or a good camera, and don't miss the action: grip-and-grins, casting, laughing, rowing, lounging. And speaking of phones, take yours, but theirs should stay at home. No arguments on this one. Getting kids to pay attention to life might be your biggest challenge. You can put stuff up on Instagram later.

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