

FISHING FUN-DAMENTALS

Taking a first-timer fishing? Here's how to make it fun — and decide whether you've caught dinner.

BY LISA BALLARD



KID-FRIENDLY CASTING. Turn that first day into a lifetime of fishing.

If you're an angler, there's no better way to introduce young people to the outdoors than to take them fishing — hopefully more than once. Clint Kowalick, coordinator of the Go FishIN program at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, caught his first bluegill at age four and has been hooked ever since. He now trains others how to mentor first-timers and offers the following advice.

Think Small

For any new angler, especially children, it's important to set them up for success. That means focusing on smaller fish the first time out. "The best fish to target are panfish such as bluegills and other sunfish," says Kowalick. "It's better to catch 25 minnow-sized bluegills in an hour than one five-pound bass in a day. Kids want to see the bobber go down and reel something in."

Tackle Equipment Size

Kowalick recommends starting kids with a spincasting rod and a

push-button reel because they're inexpensive, come with light line, and are easy to use. He suggests a set-up that's longer than the novelty rods designed for very young children. "My daughter caught her first fish with her Barbie® pole, but she outgrew it quickly," he explains. "A little higher quality rod, which might cost about \$20, holds up to use. It's also four to five feet long... You can cast farther, and you can feel the fish nibbling on the bait better."

Are fish stealing your kid's bait? Kowalick blames the bobber. A common mistake is attaching a large red-and-white bobber on a first-timer's line. Instead, Kowalick uses a small, thin, elongated, and brightly-colored bobber that is less buoyant, making it easier for a small fish to pull down — and easier for kids to watch for the bobbing motion. Another problem with a big bobber is that if a child doesn't feel the fish bite, the fish might swallow the hook deeply, which is bad for the fish if you plan to release it.

Kowalick reminds mentors to weight the line with lead-free split-shot to help kids cast farther but not so much

weight that it pulls the bobber down. He also uses a small #6, #8, or #10 hook because big fish can take a small hook but small fish can't bite a big one.

Use Live Bait

What you put on the hook matters, and Kowalick recommends using live bait. "Red wigglers, those worms on the sidewalk after it rains, are the best. Or waxworms, also called 'bee moths' as they're the larval stage of a bee moth, are another good option. Waxworms fit perfectly on a #8 hook." If you're squeamish about putting live bait on a hook, your kid will be too, Kowalick warns, so practice ahead of time.

Cast Close to Home

After gearing up, the other key decision is where to go fishing. Kowalick favors a local park with good shoreline access or a fishing pier that's wheelchair accessible. "The walls on the pier make kids feel safe, especially if they aren't good swimmers," he says. "The pier extends over the water. On sunny days, fish need shade and will go under the pier," which increases the likelihood of getting a bite.

Most importantly, Kowalick believes fishing needs to be simple and fun if you want kids to do it again. "Go to a park where they can fish a little and then have a picnic or play on the playground," he advises. "Don't tell them to sit down and be quiet or get angry if the line gets tangled. And if they don't want to hold the fish the first time, that's okay. They might the second or third time."

DID YOU KNOW?

According to the International Game Fish Association, the current world-record bluegill was caught in 1950 at Ketona Lake, Alabama, and weighed 4 pounds 12 ounces.