

For kids' sake

Taking children fishing can be fulfilling for all

By Wes Allison

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My grandfather used to take me fishing in the Chesapeake Bay when I would visit him in Virginia, or so I hear; I was apparently too small to barely hold a rod, much less remember the trips.

But I do remember fishing the small pond near my grandparents' house, and how my brother and I would root around for redworms in the decaying leaves piled in the corner of the back yard fence. Our coffee can full of wigglers and cane poles ready, my grandfather would drive us down to the little lake.

He'd feed the worms onto the small hooks, and my brother and I would toss the whole contraption — worms, hooks, split shot and big, red-and-white bobbers — into the water just a few feet from the bank.

Before long, a bobber would begin to dance and dunk in the water, and a wriggly, very little fish would soon be on the sand. That was the highlight of every summer trip to Virginia, seeing the bottom white half of the big bobber disappear and knowing that a fish was on the other end.

Another such excited angler is Richmond Rawlings, a five-year old from Greenville who pulled a 2-pound, 10-ounce bream from a pond near his house to win that category of the *The Greenville News'* monthly fishing contest in July.

"I couldn't even hold it," Richmond said of his fish, the biggest he's ever caught. "My dad had to hold it. My dad's going to frame it, and he might put it in my room."

While Richmond and other kids see fishing as a fun way to spend an evening after supper, grown-ups can benefit, too.

"I think it's good, wholesome entertainment," said Richmond's father, Denver, a Greenville businessman. "Fishing's an inexpensive hobby that's a heck of a lot of fun. I'd rather have my kids doing that than playing video games."

"Fishing builds a good father-son relationship. My dad always did that sort of thing for me, and you want your kids to do some of the things you do so you can enjoy them together."

The time spent wetting a line, as with many activities or hobbies, also offers a healthy chance for parents and children to get to know each other and to enjoy each other's company outside of the daily routine.

"Something like fishing is good because you have a lot of time together, and people tend to fill it with talking," said Dr. Joseph Babinski, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Marshall I. Pickens Hospital in Greenville. "It's also important for parents and kids to develop some common interests, things they can do together."

Role models such as parents, grandparents, and older siblings also serve to introduce their young ones to activities they otherwise would not be exposed to until a later age.

"Most kids don't have some idea of 'Hey, I want to go into swimming,' or something," Babinski said. "Parents need to give kids ideas and suggestions, presenting to them new things."

Taking a child fishing is a different sort of game than going alone or with friends; the same rules

don't apply.

"I don't care if I catch anything or not," said Tommy Vaughn, an avid sportsman from Greenville who takes his son fishing as often as he can. "I like to see enjoyment from him. As long as the kid enjoys himself, that's what counts. I love it."

Other differences in taking a child fishing aren't as radical as not caring whether or not you yourself catch fish. The experienced angler should tone the sport down to the child's level, especially if his student has spent very little or no time with a rod in his hands.

"I think it's really important that they're taken to a place where there's a lot of activity, even if it's only small bream," said Phil Clawson, a former fishing guide on Lake Hartwell who guided family trips.

Children need plenty of chances at catching fish, he said, and bream fishing with worms in an accessible farm pond is a good place to start.

"You may be bored doing that," he said, "but I can guarantee they won't."

Initial success, even if they're biggest fish is only a couple of ounces, will keep children interested in the sport and they'll want to go back.

Farm ponds are also a good place to begin because fishing trips can be made as short as necessary, according to your child's attention span.

Once a child conquers the basics of fishing with a worm and a cork, and gets the feel of playing a fish, Clawson recommends that his teacher work a few basic lures into the program.

A shiny topwater lure with lots of action, like a Rappala, is best, he said. "They'll fish with it longer because they can see it and feel the vibrations as they pull it in. It'll keep their attention."

As the child progresses, teach him that each lure is like a tool, Clawson said: different "tools" are needed in different conditions, and a child can begin to learn which will work best in each setting.

Don't be stingy on the rod. A high quality, closed-face reel on a five-foot, medium action rod is best, Clawson said, because it will last longer and is easy to operate. An added benefit is that dad can use it himself for ultralight fishing.

There are no guarantees, but chances are good a child will take to the sport. But don't push it.

Many kids won't enjoy a new activity the first or second time they try it, Babinski said, because they have not yet developed the skills necessary to be successful at it.

He said it's important a parent teach children the skills, such as baiting a hook or casting a rod, and encourage and support their efforts. But Babinski stressed that participation in a new sport should be presented as a choice, not an obligation.