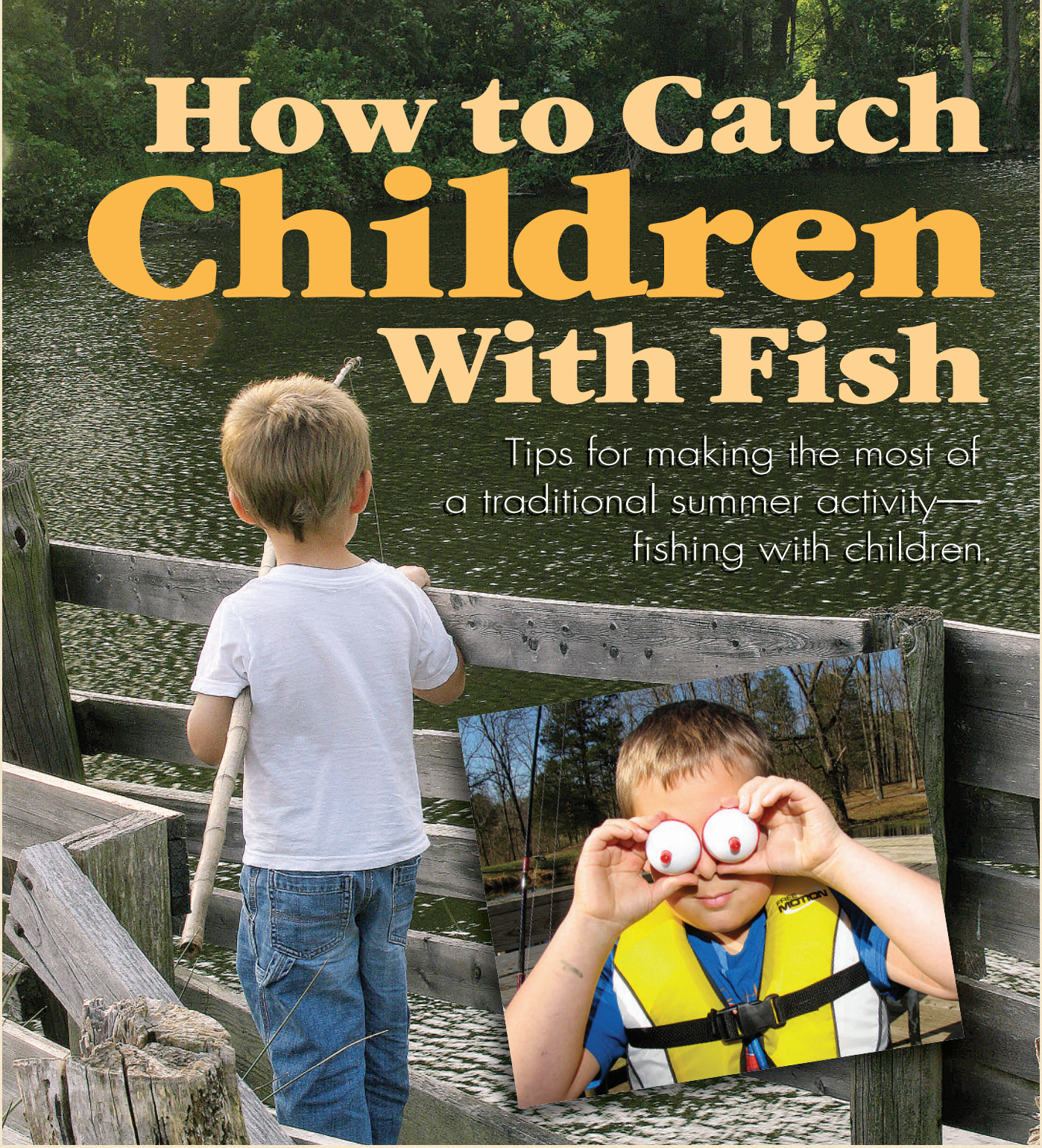
How to Catch Children With Fish

Tips for making the most of a traditional summer activity—fishing with children.



Story By Herb Dreier
Photos By Joe McFarland

In the last few decades the attitude toward fishing changed.

In past years, it seemed like everybody knew how to fish and when they went fishing they were usually successful. Today's children participate in wider array of activities, including numerous sports and video games. Consequently, many rarely fish—perhaps not at all.

Today some young parents would like to show their children how to fish, but lack the experience to catch fish when they take their children out.

If a parent wants to get their child interested in fishing, two things are critically important: They have to catch fish and the experience must not be boring. A fish of any size will work; it doesn't have to be a whopper. The following tips will help anybody catch more fish.

Start with a regular-sized fishing pole, one that is 5.5 to 6 feet long. Small children usually can handle these outfits. The short, brightly colored rods and reels that are marketed to children simply aren't long enough to work well, and can lead to a frustrating experience.

Start them young and your children will gain a "fin-filled" lifetime pastime.

The vast majority of fish are small and should be your target when fishing with children. If what they catch looks like a fish and swims, it will create excitement.

(Photo by Herb Dreier.)

Include a camera in your tackle box and capture a record of that memorable first fish.

To catch these fish, use a small hook (size 8 or smaller). Hook sizes run backwards—size 8 is larger than size 10. One of the commonly sought-after fish is the bluegill (the Illinois state fish), and the mouth of a small bluegill is about the size of a Cheerio.

The bait also should be small. If worms are the choice, use a piece approximately 0.5 inches long and slide it (like putting your foot through a sock) onto the bottom part of the hook. The fish must be able to get the hook and bait into its mouth to get caught. If you get a lot of bites but can't catch fish, switch to a smaller hook and piece of bait. Surprisingly, bigger fish (up to 5 pounds) can be caught on a small hook.

If you use a bobber, use a small one (an inch or smaller in diameter) as you must be able to recognize when the fish is biting. A fish has to be able to pull the float under water, or at least move it laterally across the surface, to alert you about the bite. Small fish may not be able to pull a big bobber under the water. Also, make sure your rig is set up so the bobber keeps the bait at least several inches off the bottom of the water body.

It is recommended weight be added to your line 3 to 6 inches above the hook to sink the bait down to the level you want to fish. Split shots are easily added, but don't add too much weight, making if difficult for fish to pull against the heavily weighted line.

License required

A resident sport fishing license may be obtained by anyone who has been a resident of Illinois 30 days prior to purchase. Anglers under 16 years of age, and persons declared legally disabled or blind, may fish without a license. Owners or tenants (if they reside on the land) may fish in waters on or flowing over their lands without a license (this exemption does not apply to club and organizational lakes or lake developments). Persons on active duty in the Armed Forces are considered residents. A person on active duty in the Armed Forces, who entered the service from Illinois and is an Illinois resident, may fish without a license while on leave.

Additional information, including non-resident requirements and how to purchase licenses and stamps online, may be found at www.dnr.state.il.us/fish.

Learn the basics, then introduce a child to the wild thrills of fishing.

When you have a bite, yank up on the fishing pole to set the hook. Setting the hook means jerking up on the fishing pole at the right time to pull the hook into the fish's mouth. Be patient—setting the hook is a learned skill taking time and practice. If the fish swallows the hook, you were too slow pulling up on the pole.

Finally, select a fishing spot close to where you think the fish are hiding. Small fish always are looking for a place to hide from predators, and big fish are usually hunting small fish. In essence, almost all fish will be found in and around areas that offer cover. Good places to fish include rip-rapped areas where rocks extend into the water, around downed trees, near brushy areas and along weed lines. Many times children like to cast way out to the middle of the water body—where there is no cover or protection for fish and, thus, few fish. Casting to the middle may look good, but seldom results in catches.

Finally, don't be too patient. If you are fishing with a bobber and not getting bites, don't make a child wait too long for something to happen. It's boring. Try to find the fish, don't wait for them to come to you. Move the bobber and bait several feet, or move yourself a short distance to a different area. Also try fishing at different depths by moving the line up or down on the bobber.

If the water you are fishing has a good fish population and the weather is good, you should be able to catch fish almost every time out. Even if you don't have much experience at fishing, you can still become an expert in a child's eyes by following these tips.

Remember: You can lead children to water but you can't make them fish. Demonstrate these basic fishing techniques, then let their natural curiosity take over.

But watch out. Children have beginner's luck on their side. You might not be the "expert" for long.

For more great fishing tips, visit the **I Fish Illinois** Web site at www.ifishillinois.org.

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