



# Get 'em hooked young

With a bit of planning and the right gear, kids can enjoy fishing as much as you do.

Watching a child's joy when they catch a fish is priceless; you can't help but smile at their enthusiasm and pride when they reel in a fish all by themselves.

Fishing is fun. It's active, it's outdoors, it's challenging and, more than anything, it's unpredictable and a fabulous way to get your kids outside, spending quality time connecting as a family and engaging with nature. Sure, it can get hectic, especially with multiple hook-ups, tangled lines and trying to keep bait up to a hungry school of fish, but it's no more challenging than getting kids ready, homework done and everything packed for the school run each morning.

My husband, Ashley, and I fish regularly with our three boys (aged three-, six- and eight-years) and have been boating with them since well before they could crawl. At that stage, we would only take them during calm weather, making sure they always wore correctly fitting personal flotation devices (PFDs) and being very conservative in regard to where and when we went boating.



When we had just one child, it was relatively easy and Ashley and I got a fair bit of rod time. But as the boys multiplied, so did the time required to keep their rods in the water and teach them the fundamentals of fishing. The good thing now is they can all hold their rods, wind in their own fish and cast independently – albeit a bit wildly in the case of our three-year-old, Bailey.

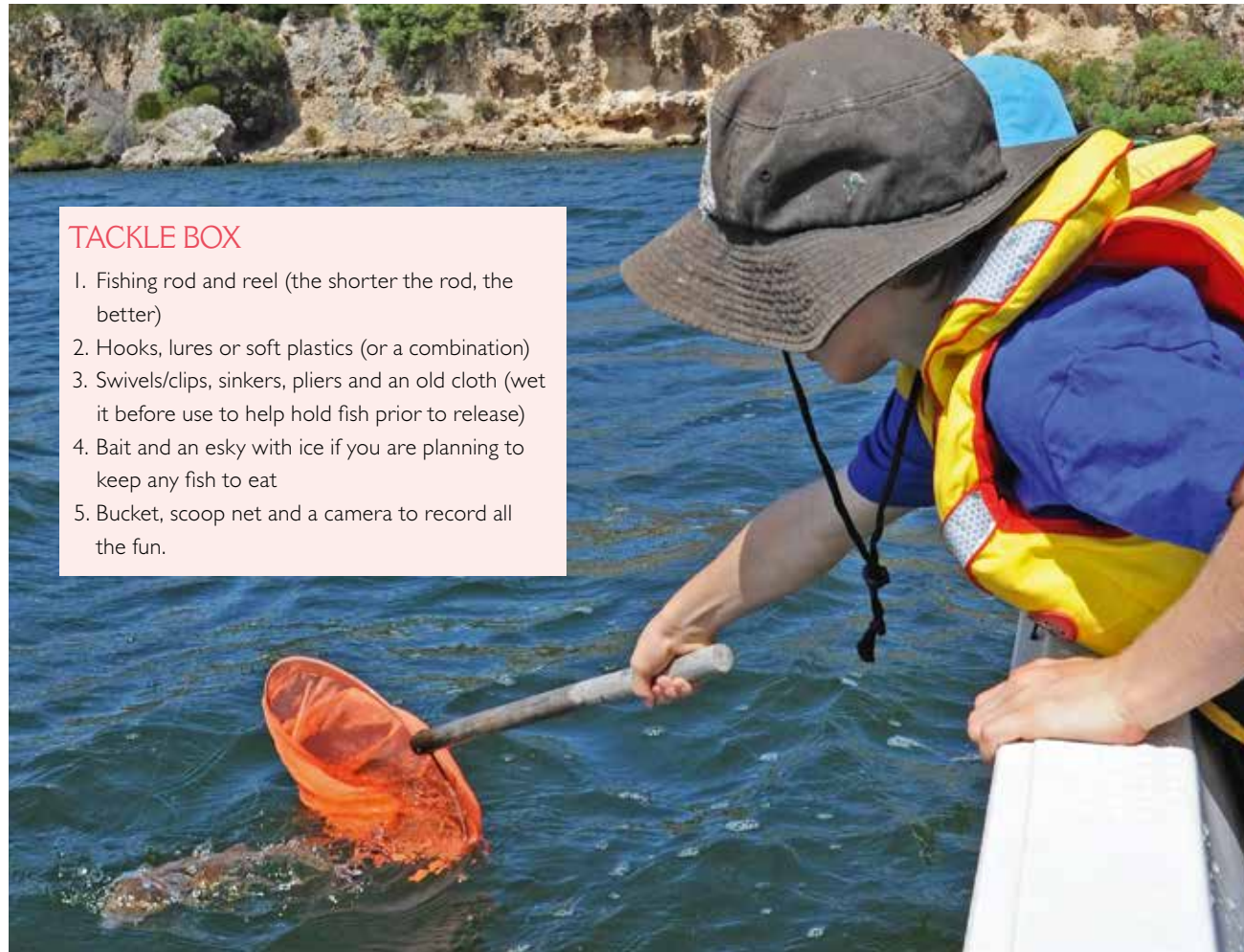
Time invested in teaching them the basics is now paying off and the kids have already outgunned us on more than one occasion. On one of those days Bailey, at just three years, landed a 50cm King George whiting almost independently, just requiring a little help to hold his rod steady as he wound it in. After that fish, he became one of our most committed anglers and

*Above: Being out-fished is actually a happy experience when it's by your own children ... Bailey does it in style with a superb 50cm King George.*

*Left: Catching trout in our old fishing grounds in rural Victoria was a very different experience to the saltwater fishing our kids have grown up with.*

By Emma George





### TACKLE BOX

1. Fishing rod and reel (the shorter the rod, the better)
2. Hooks, lures or soft plastics (or a combination)
3. Swivels/clips, sinkers, pliers and an old cloth (wet it before use to help hold fish prior to release)
4. Bait and an esky with ice if you are planning to keep any fish to eat
5. Bucket, scoop net and a camera to record all the fun.

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loves to practise his casting in the backyard, using an old lure (with the hooks removed) attached to his little 3ft 6in minnow rod.

### STARTING EARLY

Kids can have a go at fishing even as toddlers, beginning by winding a reel and helping catch a fish or touch its slimy scales. Children are very inquisitive at this age – we found all our boys enjoyed fishing trips when they were only one or two years old.

Times have changed since we were children. Now, we live in a technology-driven world, with many kids staying indoors playing virtual games and interacting with their iPads rather than getting outside and exploring the real world. Fishing is a

great excuse to get them outdoors and it is an easy and relatively inexpensive activity, which can be enjoyed by everyone.

Rod and reel combos start from as little as \$30, and all you need additionally is some basic tackle, a few lures or some bait ... that's days of entertainment for the price of a family movie ticket. When buying equipment for children, don't spend a fortune as it may be dropped over the side of the boat, stood on, or dunked in the water. We try to avoid lending our gear to them as the boys have broken too many graphite rods while striving to perfect their technique.

But if your children are going to do a bit of fishing, it's worthwhile buying a slightly better-quality reel as it will last longer and they will find it easier to cast and retrieve with. Think about using braid or good-quality fishing line, as the last thing the kids want is to lose their fish due to equipment failure. We have found that short rods work very well, especially in boats, as it reduces the amount of times the kids hit each other (and us!) as they try to cast and land fish.

*We tend to lose a few fish by the time the kids get their nets lined up, often taking several swipes before they catch them, but it's all part of the fun – and that's what it's all about.*





... that's days of entertainment for the price of a family movie ticket.



of bait. Be prepared for tangles, lost fish, maybe tears or frustration – it's all part of learning and, once kids perfect their techniques and start regularly catching fish, their sense of satisfaction is enormous.

A bit of burley goes a long way – not only does it attract fish, the kids enjoy throwing it into the water and watching what follows the trail.

Try to keep children active. A good way to do this is by using lures and soft plastics as kids naturally want to wind and cast. Sometimes, keeping hooks baited and on the bottom where they need to be can be a challenge for a child who just wants to 'wind'. A good option might be to leave the rod with bait in a rod holder and put a soft plastic or a hard-bodied lure on another rod. That way they can practise their casting and retrieving and have the opportunity to catch a fish at the same time.

It is advisable to be cautious when kids are casting a distance rather than just dropping their baited hook to the bottom. We ensure all barbs on hooks are crushed so if there is an accident, they can be extracted relatively easily. Wearing sunglasses and hats is a good safety practice, too; not only do they protect from ultraviolet rays, they are also good shields if a lure goes near someone's face or head.

The boys love their fishing but, as with all kids, their attention span is limited, so we always have alternatives to keep them engaged. A simple net

A great way to familiarise kids with the equipment required for fishing is to set them up with their own small tackle box. Our boys love having their own gear and enjoy sifting through their little lures, clips, sinkers, hooks and soft plastics. It also provides them with the opportunity to handle gear and to learn to be careful with hooks. As they grow older, they can practise their knot tying and how to make a rig by themselves.

### STAY CALM!

Patience is a prerequisite when fishing with kids and probably the most important thing. You don't want to turn what is a fun activity into a stressful one and end up yelling at them because they snagged their line or tipped over the bucket

Top: Herring are a great fish to target with kids – they are easy to catch and jump often, which adds excitement.


Above: Never a dull moment when kids, water and rods are involved ... especially when using soft plastics, as they keep them busy casting and retrieving and we don't have to rebait any hooks.

and bucket provide endless entertainment, as they love nothing more than netting fish or jellyfish and watching them swim around in a bucket. When that becomes boring, they use it as a sand bucket or to collect anything from shells to bottle tops and other 'treasures' they find along the way.

Make your fishing trips an adventure, involve the kids in the planning, and get them to think about where they want to go or what sort of fish they might like to catch. Get them to look in books or on the internet and help them find pictures of locations, the types of fish found in that area and how to catch them.

If you have a fish identification book, take it with you and see if the kids can work out what fish they catch. If you don't know what you need and want to find out where the fish are biting, visit your local tackle store as it's a great source of knowledge and equipment.

We have learned along the way not to expect too much from our children and to try to keep our outings balanced. There have been times when Ashley and I have fished a little too hard for the kid's liking and they have become bored and not enjoyed the day as much as we have. The right balance is sometimes hard to achieve, but it is important for us that our kids enjoy fishing and boating as much as we do.

Some of our best family moments have been out fishing on the boat together and I only hope as the kids grow into adults, they will still enjoy boating and fishing with us and we will have a common bond which will continue for years to come. 



### TOP 5 TIPS FOR FISHING WITH KIDS

1. Praise and patience. It's inevitable that there will be plenty of crossed lines, tangles and lost fish as it takes time for kids to perfect their technique. Do your best to keep positive, keep their confidence up and let them know how well they are doing.
2. Fun. It's all about the experience and not about how much you catch or what you take home for dinner. Make it an adventure, keep it varied and, when the fishing slows down, have a net on hand to catch jellyfish, baitfish, or seaweed, or spend time doing a bit of beach-combing.
3. Give the kids independence and let them do things for themselves, such as putting on their own bait, learning to cast their rod, and tie knots. The more self-sufficient they are, the more rewarding it is for them and the less you will have to do.
4. Catch and Release. Teach your kids to respect fish and their environment. If you are not going to eat the fish, let your kids release it carefully. If children are distressed about touching fish or killing fish, try to be sensitive as they will become more confident with every trip.
5. Safety. Ensure they wear PFDs, sunglasses, hats, and sunscreen and stay hydrated. Crush barbs on hooks and keep knives out of reach. Only take the kids boating on calm days.

Above: Teaching kids to respect the environment and the importance of releasing fish is a vital step in protecting our waterways and future fish stocks.

Left: Keeping kids happy is all about variety – when they have had enough fishing, we generally end up at a beach somewhere, exploring and seeing what they can find in the shallows.