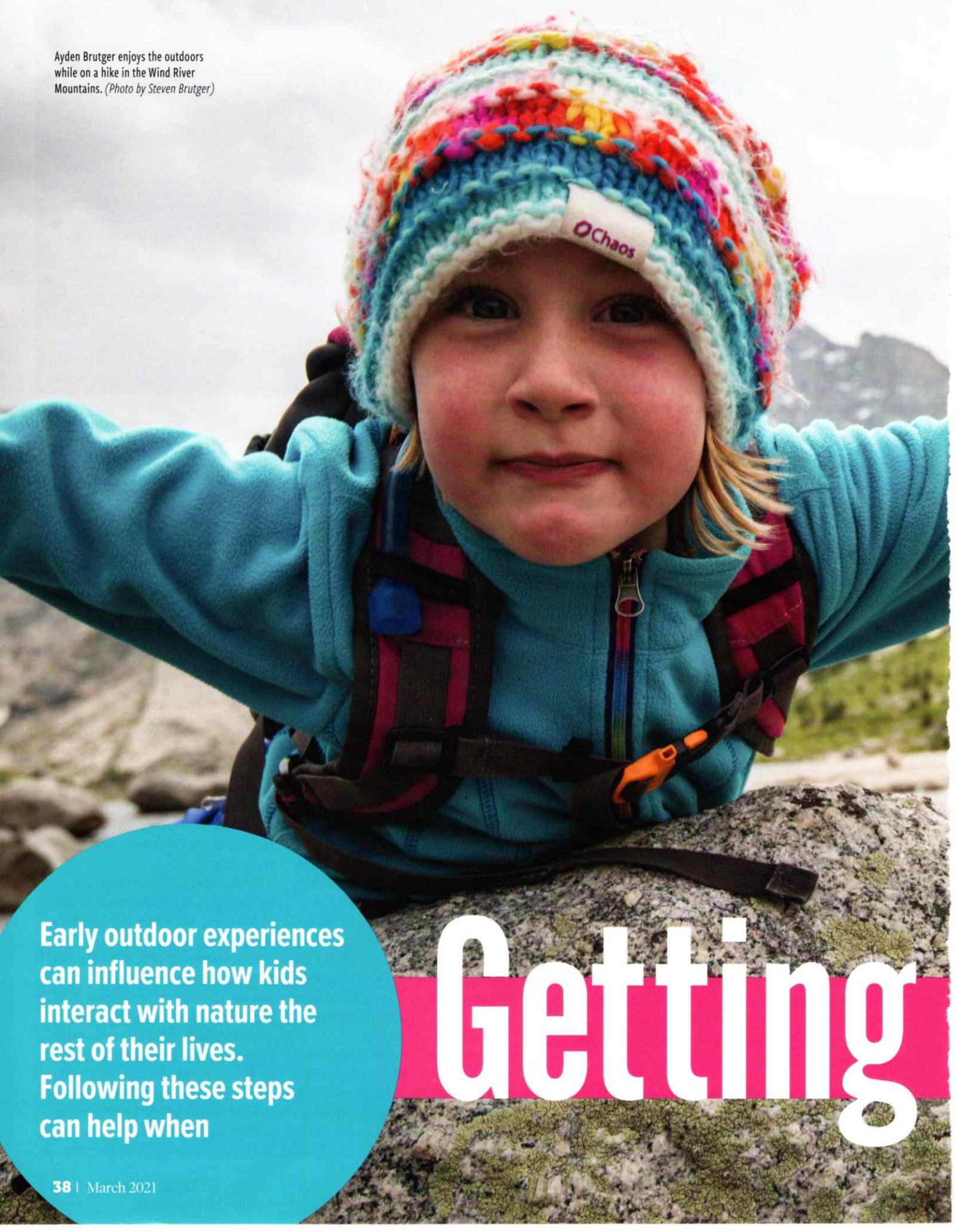


Ayden Brutger enjoys the outdoors while on a hike in the Wind River Mountains. (Photo by Steven Brutger)



Early outdoor experiences can influence how kids interact with nature the rest of their lives. Following these steps can help when

Getting



kids outside

By Lisa Ballard

As Zach, a lifelong angler, began to filet the catch of the day, his 5-year-old daughter dragged a stool to the counter. Lily climbed atop the stool and watched as her dad meticulously prepared the fish.

"What's that?" asked Lily.

"Smallmouth bass," replied Zach.

With the fish on its side, Zach skillfully slipped a knife between the pale meat and rib bones. When the meat came free he slid it in front of Lily, who cautiously touched it with her small index finger.

"Are we going to eat it?" asked Lily.

An hour later Zach served his wife, Lea, and Lily delicious, tender bass filets sautéed in a frying pan.

"Will you teach me how to catch a fish, daddy?" asked Lily.

Thrilled at the interest in fishing, Zach agreed to take her fishing the next day on Flaming Gorge Reservoir where he had caught the bass the day before. The reservoir, at 65 square miles, is a big body of water and one of Wyoming's better-known bass fisheries.

The next morning, the duo left the house before daybreak and were on the water as the sun came up. Zach rigged one of his lighter spinning rods for Lily, then showed her how to flip the bale and fling the lure. It didn't go well. Within minutes, a rat's nest of monofilament lay at her feet. Lily, on the verge of crying, abandoned the mess and crawled onto her father's lap.

As Zach awkwardly worked on the line while balancing his daughter between his arms, the wind picked up. Lily crawled halfway into Zach's coat and fell asleep. She awoke a half-hour later, about the time her father got the rod ready for another cast.

"Can we go home now?" asked Lily. "I'm cold. I don't like fishing anymore."

If you've got kids, perhaps you had a similar experience with your son or daughter and can't figure out what went wrong. Just because you are an expert angler, hunter, paddler, wildlife watcher, camper or hiker doesn't mean you know how to hook your kid on your outdoor passion.

"Keep kids comfortable and having fun, and you'll create memories they'll work to replicate the rest of their lives," said Kathryn Boswell, hunter and angler participation coordinator for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

By adhering to the following tips as a parent, the odds are higher your kids will get hooked on the outdoors just like you. Fishing is the example, but the principles apply to other outdoor pursuits.

1 Target the right species. Zach took Lily bass fishing because it was the species that caught her interest. However, to his daughter fish are fish. She doesn't know or care about the differences between a bass, a trout or a pumpkinseed.

A panfish on a small pond would have been a better choice for Lily's first few outings. Fishing at a smaller location with less technical tackle and higher chances of success can draw in kids. Try taking the kids to a community fishery or kids-only fishing pond when they're starting out. Making the right choice of species — whether fishing, hunting or wildlife watching — helps other important aspects of those first few outings go right.

2 Use the right gear. Finding gear appropriate for your child will make the experience better for everyone. Getting items that are of sufficient quality, properly sized and easily operated for your kids can make a huge difference in their experience.

Most parents outfit their youngster with cheap, kiddie gear. It looks cute. It's downsized, and it's a low-risk investment if the child doesn't click with the activity. Unfortunately, poor gear is more likely to discourage a kid. In the case of fishing, a cheap youth rod is difficult to cast and gives minimal control if Junior happens to hook a fish, reducing the odds of getting that fish to net.

Zach did the opposite, giving his 5-year-old an adult rod because it was what he had. Even though it was one of his lighter rods, it was still too much for Lily to handle. He got the light rod part correct, but a quality, push-button reel is a better choice for a 5-year-old first-timer. It's simple to use and doesn't tangle easily.

3 Pick the right location. Kindergarteners will likely want to go fishing again if they catch five fish in a half-hour the first day. Next time, they may have the patience to catch three fish in an hour. On their third outing, they might catch only one fish in two hours, but they'll be proud of that fish.

One of Zach's mistakes was picking Flaming Gorge Reservoir, a big body of water. It's a world-renowned fishery, but he burned up that critical first half-hour and more getting the boat in the water and then getting to where he wanted Lily to start casting. Maybe the ride was interesting to Lily, but the focus for her became more about boating itself instead of having a boatload of fun catching fish.

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Consider their age. Most children don't have the coordination to cast a rod of any kind before about 4-years-old. At that age, they can hold it and watch a bobber. By 6 or 7, most can cast a spinning rod by themselves, reel in and cast again. By 8, they might begin handling a fly rod with enough coordination to hook a fish.

Lily is a case in point. Her dad's spinning rod was too much for her to handle. In addition to her young age, it was her first time. Those few kindergarteners who can cast a spinning rod likely started fishing younger than that with easier tackle, then progressed through experience and mentoring. Practicing casting before you get on the water can help to reduce learning time and increase time fishing.



Jack Ballard teaches his 8-year-old daughter, Zoe, to cast a fly rod. Kids younger than that are more likely to have success with a spinning rod. (Photo by Dominic Ballard)

5 Dress kids in appropriate clothing and footwear.

A comfortable kid is a happy kid. Parents don't purposely dress their children inappropriately for the conditions, though they'll often settle for whatever is already in the closet, deeming it close enough. But is it really?

Clothing and footwear are as important to an outdoor experience as any other gear. From children's points of view, they want to mimic mommy and daddy and they know when they're not. Older kids want to look the part, especially teenagers. If you've got the budget, consider outfitting them with their own clothing and footwear rather than giving them your old hand-me-downs. The new stuff helps set them up for success performance-wise, and they'll feel like they belong in the activity.

6 Pick the right day.

This is another case of close enough not cutting it. Perhaps you've got a demanding job with limited free time. It's still worth the wait. Anticipation is a good thing. A decent day for an avid outdoor enthusiast might not be for your inexperienced child.

In the case of Zach and Lily, though the day was clear the wind picked up, adding an unwanted challenge for Lily, who was already struggling casting, and it made her chilly.

Eventually, kids learn to deal with the elements and might even embrace them as you do. But in the beginning, it's wise to wait for the perfect day. It's more enjoyable, and it's easier to teach children a new skill when they don't have to deal with the weather and water or backcountry conditions.

7 Keep it short.

There are many theories about the length of human attention span, but all agree it has decreased from the old 20-minute standard. Some studies claim it's now as little as eight minutes in our modern era of texting, tweeting and messaging. Ardent anglers spend the day on the water; hunters walk or sit for hours and hikers happily trek from dawn to dusk because they can refocus on something about the activity that interests them. Most kids, especially young kids, don't do that. Take Lily. After a few attempts at casting unsuccessfully she lost interest and moved on to something else — snuggling with her dad.

When introducing kids to any activity, including those in the outdoors, it's imperative for a parent to keep it short, even if the fish are biting. A good way to encourage your kids to get outside again is to leave them wanting more.



This young angler has water shoes for wet wading, good sunglasses to protect his eyes and reduce glare off the water and a quilted jacket for the foggy day. (Photo by Steven Brutger)





A young angler tries her luck from the front of a canoe on a calm day. (Photo by Lisa Ballard)



A young angler celebrates his catch. Using equipment appropriate for a child's age and experience level can help that kid to have fun when participating in new activities outside. (WGFD photo)

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Allow the use of electronics within reason. Kids are as wired as adults these days. If your kid is old enough to have a cell phone and you forbid its use while outdoors, you risk starting the outing on a negative note. There's a balance, of course.

If kids are only interested in the cell phone and are disengaged from fishing, instead of taking it away work to gain their attention. Hand them a rod. Have them pick a lure and put it on. Get them involved in the day from the get-go, including planning it, then it's their day instead of yours. In addition, encourage them to take photos, post them on social media if they're old enough and send them to friends. Then they're telling their peer group, "Look at me! I'm doing something fun!" If they get a bunch of interaction online, chances are they'll do it again.

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Measure success in different ways. Too often outdoorsy parents measure the success of a day in terms of the number or size of fish they catch, the size of the deer they shot or the number of birds they bagged. But quantity and size are not the only way to measure the day.

Wildlife intrigues children. Take Lily when Zach fileted the bass. In the case of fishing, take the time to examine a fish and show a child the unique characteristics. Look at parts like its eyes, gills, fins, inside its mouth, even where its poop comes out.

Fishing also offers opportunities to teach kids about the environment, boating skills and water safety. It can be as fun as catching a fish for a child to witness an osprey dive 100 feet into the water and then take to the air again with a trout in its talons. It's part of the positive experience they come to associate with fishing.

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Get outside! Zach got this right. While the day he picked might not have been the best, he still went — something a lot of people don't do. Getting your children outside can really help shape how they view the outdoors. Just getting out there is the first step.

If you avoid some of these common mistakes and get your kids outdoors, your child will have fun and want to go again. After all, the first step toward creating the next generation of anglers, hunters, paddlers and wildlife watchers is literally stepping outside.

— An award-winning writer and photographer and a long-time contributor to *Wyoming Wildlife*, Lisa Ballard is the mother of one son and three stepchildren, all of whom are proficient hikers, hunters, anglers and paddlers. She writes extensively about taking kids outdoors for magazines coast to coast. www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com