

# BONDING: Let kids learn by doing, but always be safe

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interconnected web of nature. While walking in the woods, he took time to point out tracks and animal signs to children. He taught us to identify various birds and animals we spotted even if that meant taking home a slightly lighter game bag.

When introducing children to hunting, keep it simple and active. Rather than taking young first-time hunters on a deer or turkey hunt, try something with more activity like a squirrel or dove hunt. Children might enjoy following beagles chasing rabbits through the woods. Let youngsters work up to deer and turkey hunting.

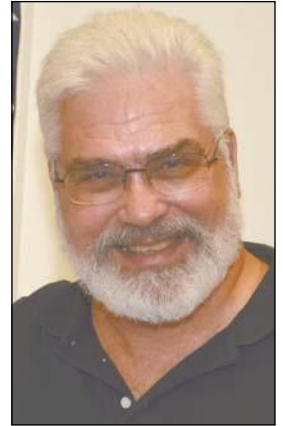
A shooting preserve makes an excellent place to introduce children to hunting. Shooting preserves release pen-raised quail, ducks, chukar or pheasant. Guides work trained dogs to find, flush and retrieve birds. This type of hunt guarantees action and helps a youngster improve his or her wing shooting skills.

Even during the offseason, families can walk through a park or preserve and “hunt” without firing a shot. See how many squirrels a child can spot or who can see it first. Let children practice stalking skills to see how close they can get to a squirrel or rabbit without spooking the animal.

Although Dad didn't care as much about bagging a limit as enjoying a good time, he never compromised on safety. From an early age, he pounded gun safety into our heads. We never handled a gun without first checking to make sure it was unloaded and never loaded a gun until we were ready to hunt. Whenever getting into vehicles or crossing difficult obstacles, everyone unloaded their guns. It only takes a few seconds to reload, but it takes less than a second to cause a tragic accident.

We never pointed a gun at anything we didn't want to shoot and never shot at anything until we absolutely identified the target and what lay beyond it so we could make a safe shot. If that meant not taking a questionable shot and letting a game animal escape, that's what happened. Whenever a new person, old or young, came along for a hunt, Dad always gave that person a crash course in gun safety. He made his rules perfectly clear before anyone ever loaded a firearm.

Because hunting with a child takes effort, sacrifice and patience, many sportsmen prefer the company of like-minded adults. That's fine, but a parent will never meet a better fishing or hunting partner than one created over time — the most precious, fleeting and unforgiving of all gifts.



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