

LEARNING ARCHERY

Young people may be the lifeblood of a sport, but the wrong kind of approach to teaching can be a real turn-off. John Dudley takes us through the hits and misses of introducing young beginners to archery

Often, I hear parents ask: "When should I start my child into archery?" It's a tricky question with no straightforward answer, but it may be crucial to how far your child develops into an above-average archer. I don't have children of my own, so I'm not claiming to be the best to answer all questions about kids. I do, however, remember my own childhood and I know what worked for me. I have worked with thousands of young archers over my career, since the ASA shoots with Shirley Strickland way back in 1997. Shirley coordinated some of the first kids' shoots at professional 3D events. I was always proud to be part of the events on Sunday where I met some great kids. The things we did there were great for actively getting kids involved in archery. There are a few key things to keep in mind when introducing your child to archery; most importantly to make sure they progress and hold interest. Proper equipment, practice, and coaching will be the things you need to provide as a peer.

Tools of the trade

Equipment is crucial in any sport. I love to play golf, but for years and years I was not very good at it. I played quiet often but never really progressed. Then my dad offered to buy me some custom clubs for my birthday. We went to the pro shop and I was custom fitted, not only for my height, but also my swing. The clubs cost about \$250 more than I would have paid for hand-me-downs. But my first time on the course proved it was money well spent. I played so much better and it was so nice not spending more time looking for balls than hitting them. My point is, when you feel you are ready to introduce your child into archery you should also be ready to purchase equipment that will ensure they enjoy the sport and see results. I am going to break this down into two different categories:

The first is a young child, who has never shot, and you want to get shooting instinctively while you are practising. For this a Genesis bow is so well matched.



He'll grow into it! Ill-fitting equipment is a real turn-off for young beginners



Kids' equipment need not be dull!

This bow pulls like a recurve but does not increase draw poundage the further you pull back. It does not have a positive stop at a particular draw either, so it will fit any child and grow with them. The bow has a peak pulling weight of 20lb. I use Genesis bows for teaching key fundamentals to all my students. These bows are available in two sizes and will fit almost any child that can pull at least 10lb.

The second category is a child that knows the key fundamentals of archery and is ready to get a proper bow; including an aiming device (sight) and possibly even a mechanical release aid. For this end you need a bow with a large range of adjustment in draw length. The new Hoyt Trykon Jr., for example, is perfect because of the modules and versa cam 1/2 systems used to adjust it. For the bow to grow with your child you should be able to adjust it from 17 - 25". I grew from a size 10 shoe to a size 12 in less than a year when I was a youth. I'm sure my parents wished Nike made Modular shoes. Think of it like this: Would you like to shoot a bow that is 2" long or 2" short? No, probably not. In fact you wouldn't want to shoot anymore full stop if that's what you had to contend with. Giving a child an old bow of yours is most likely going to put them off. It will probably be much too long and cause them to hit their arm – a real turn-off for beginners. So don't expect your child to remain interested in archery if their equipment doesn't fit them and is more of a hassle than it is fun.

Equally important are the arrows. Preferably get your child the correct arrow that their poundage and draw length requires. It will make them more accurate and more interested. If you can't get them their own arrows, at least get them arrows that are all the same length. It is so frustrating for me to work with kids with a quiver that looks like the lost and found bucket at the local range. I know that free ones are great; but you are only loading your child with a quiver that is going to shoot a group the size of a coffee table. If nothing else, take the arrows that you bend or Robin Hood



and cut them to the length they need. The arrows may be far too stiff but at least they will be consistent. Take as much pride in their equipment as you do in your own and you will help ensure your kids enjoy archery for the longterm.

Proper practice for any beginner is a must, but especially a young student. What do all kids like? Video games. And why do they like video games? Because they can do well at them and win. Archery practice should be the same. Play games that are fun and exciting. I have had so much fun shooting at balloons or at soda cans, for example, because I can see when I hit the mark. Having a balloon go pop or a can explode is fun to see and makes you focus. I still have a blast at age 30 shooting things like that. Shooting the same distance at a spot all the time does get boring. It's boring for me, and I am already hooked on archery. Play games with your kids, alternate shots to see who hits a target first. Letting them win every so often will keep them motivated. If you keep it instinctive they could be just as accurate as you in a short period of time. Encourage them to shoot with other kids their age. It will help teach them how to be a winner and, equally important, how to be a loser as well.

Sometimes when I was coaching kids I would have a budget in mind, say \$5. And when a kid would say: "I'm going to shoot that spot over there" I would say: "are you really good enough to hit that?" Then I'd bet them a quarter they couldn't. This approach gets kids so focused and when they

do hit the mark they are rewarded. Also keep in mind a kid's favorite video game is the one they do best at. Don't be afraid to let them shoot very close. The closer they are, the more likely they are to consistently hit the gold. This does fantastic things for their esteem. You can also put up a much larger target for them to aim at. My experience is it doesn't matter how big the gold is, if they're hitting it they feel they're doing well. I have worked for summer camps with kids that have no interest in archery but are required to do it. Using these examples, even reluctant kids left having fun

Teacher training

Coaching young kids can be risky depending on how you go about it. I know there is a fine line between supporting your child's hobby with coaching and shoving archery down their throat by making them take lessons. My parents did this to me with piano lessons and I hated it. It felt like a job and even though I enjoyed it I didn't like having it as a responsibility. I wish I had been properly coached when I started archery in key things like form, alignment, and how to properly aim and execute a shot. It is important to teach beginners these things early on. It will save them so many frustrating years and they can expand on the basics as they grow and develop more interest. Kids are so much easier to coach, too, because they haven't solidified any bad habits. This makes them easier to mold into proper form. I have found the same teaching women, because they pay greater



Ed's drawlength was set way too long (above), but his accuracy improved instantly just by adjusting the draw length setting (left)

attention to detail and usually follow what you teach properly and with good focus. Guys and older men usually let ego get in the way of really admitting what they are doing is not good and asking for help in correcting it.

I see the bar being raised every year by new young faces coming into the game with incredible potential. These high-achievers are usually the offspring of archers that have learned the correct way the hard way, and have started their kids out properly. Go easy with your kids' frequency of coaching, but do get proper coaching and be consistent in following up with their coach so their form is kept in check. Visit www.archeryintheschools.org where you will find some good downloads of proven curriculums which worked well in the NASP program. Once your child has the basics then seek professional coaching.



Using bigger targets helps younger archers build confidence