

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH A STEPDAUGHTER THROUGH FISHING

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FISHING BONDS

When my husband, Jack, and I fell in love, it sounded like the perfect match. After all, the couple who hunts and fishes together, stays together, right? Our outdoorsy friends opined how they wished their spouses liked to stalk elk or hook trout. Indeed, Jack and I have spent many memorable moments pursuing big game, upland birds, waterfowl and fish together. However, it's rarely a romantic time. A second marriage for both of us when we got together, our respective baggage included three kids from his first marriage and one from mine.

Blended families are nothing new. In fact, they've become the norm. According to the American Psychological Association, the leading scientific and professional organization representing the psychological sciences in the United States, about half of all marriages in the United States end up in divorce. About 70 percent of those divorcees enter another serious relationship, of which 49 percent have children from their previous marriage.

Just because many families are familiar with divorce doesn't mean the kids will instantly accept a new stepparent. Parent-child bonding takes nurturing and time. Parent-

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stepchild bonding is even tougher, especially with school-age kids, as they often feel as if the new stepparent in their lives was not their choice, and now they must deal with, say, two mothers instead of just one, and often additional siblings who they didn't grow up with — at least in our case. Luckily, there's fishing.

BASS TACTICS. Ten years ago, when Jack and I started getting serious about our relationship, we thought it time for our kids to meet. I brought my son, Parker, age 11 at the time and Jack brought his two sons, Micah, age 12, Dominic, age 11, and his daughter Zoe, age 6, to a cabin on a lake. We planned to spend a week there, swimming, paddling, fishing and getting to know each other.

Secretly, I looked forward to meeting Zoe the most. I grew up in a male-dominated family. I was the only girl, with one brother and all male cousins, then I had a son. I looked forward to finally having another girl around with whom to share outdoor adventures, but Zoe wasn't interested at first. Her favorite activity during our first week together was building moats around her sandcastles that filled with water when the waves picked up. Micah caught the first fish.

"What should I do with it?" shouted Micah, the first evening while I was cooking dinner. He stood on the deck just outside the sliding door, holding up a two-pound bass and beaming from ear to ear.

"Can we eat it?" he begged, enthusiastically.

"You need to clean it first," said his father. "I'll show you how."

Zoe, who had ignored the fishing until then, scampered over to see the fish and to watch her dad remove its guts. Micah looked a little weak in the knees, but Zoe was unfazed by the operation. She also insisted on helping prepare the fish to be grilled, stuffing lemon slices inside the body cavity for me and rubbing lemon pepper on it; then she watched her father cook it.

"Can I go fishing tomorrow?" she asked. Jack looked at me for help. He had already promised the boys a fishing outing, and there wasn't room in our tiny row boat for another person.

"I'll take you, Zoe," I said. The offer surprised the first-grader, but she agreed. In her world, moms didn't go fishing, yet here was a mom who did.

The next day, Zoe and I put her pink Cinderella rod (Zoe's favorite color was pink at the time) and a tackle box in a canoe. I paddled along the shoreline while she trolled.

"Have you ever caught a fish before?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"Yes," said Zoe, quietly.

"Do you like fishing?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

Her one-word responses continued until suddenly her rod tip bent and wriggled.

"Fish on, Zoe!" I shouted. "Keep the line tight and reel in when you can."

A minute later, a bass barely bigger than a fingerling was in our net. Luckily, Zoe decided to let it go before she picked it up. As she held it up for a photo, its jerked out of her hands and flipped overboard. She giggled a little, watching the fish disappear into the dark water.

Though Zoe hardly spoke in the canoe or around me in general, she seemed pleased about catching a fish. I thought it a good first step toward building a relationship with her. It was a simple thing, catching a little bass, but a shared experience between us. What I didn't realize was how long it would take to truly be accepted into Zoe's life. Luckily, there's fishing.

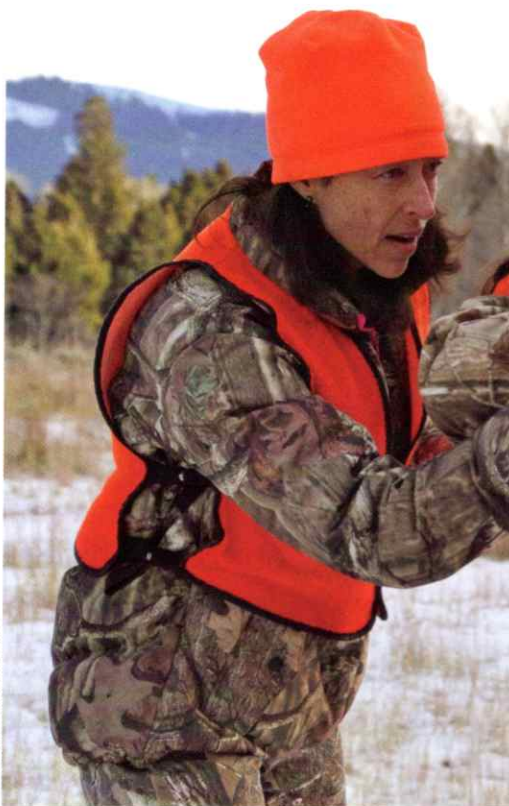
CAMPING COHORTS. According to Peggy Nolan, executive director of The Stepmom's Toolbox blog and a radio personality who offers coaching, financial, legal, social and emotional help to stepmoms, it takes about an average of seven years for stepfamilies to fully blend. To help the process along, Jack and I planned several canoe-camping trips with our four kids over the next few years. Looking back, these outdoor adventures (and misadventures) solidified us the most as a family, especially Zoe and me. One outing stands out.

We launched our flotilla of two canoes and two kayaks, aiming to set up a camp and

fish for several days. Getting to our campsite required a mile of paddling on open water on a windy, near-whitecap day, and we had a late start. When we finally arrived at our campsite, hungry, waterlogged and tired, I quickly got dinner going while Jack and the boys set up the tents. Zoe was age 10 at the time and able to cast a lure with some skill. She snuck off to fish.

"Got one!" we heard her shout. Everyone dropped what they were doing and trotted down the shoreline in the direction of her voice. We found her atop a broad

A family that hunts and fishes together stays and grows together.



© DOMINIC BALLARD

PLACES TO FISH WITH [STEP] KIDS IN COLORADO

Looking for a place to fish with your blended family? Colorado Parks and Wildlife lists over 100 spots across the state on its website that are easy to access from the shore without obstacles that can snag or tangle a line. Most of these spots also are also family-friendly places to camp, bike, canoe and picnic. Note: Adults, age 16 and older, are required to have a Colorado fishing license (available online or by calling 1-800-244-5613). Go to this interactive map to find a place near you: cpw.state.co.us/fish/TakeKidsFishing

flat rock, holding the largest bluegill we had ever seen.

"Congratulations!" I said. "You got the first fish of the trip."

It was hard to tell whether Zoe delighted more in the act of catching the fish on her own or the recognition for it. Regardless, a barrier tumbled down. She talked and talked to me for the rest of the trip, at first about the bluegill, and then about the canoes, the ducks, the other fish she caught and the paddle back. Around our campfire, she told me about her teachers, her favorite movies

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and what she wanted for her birthday. The next day, I learned about the latest Harry Potter book she was reading, why potato chips were not a good food to bring in a canoe and how stinky bug spray was compared to sunscreen. A breakthrough.

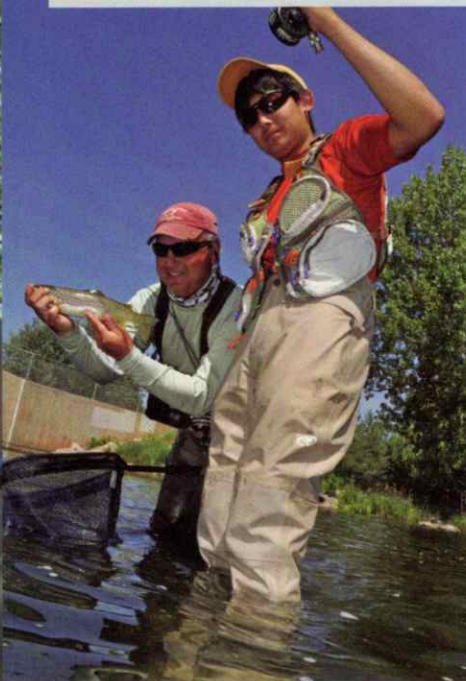
In general, my stepdaughter is shy until she gets to know a person. I credit that big bluegill for changing her attitude toward me from “person she needs to tolerate because she’s dad’s girlfriend” to “person I know and feel comfortable around.” But I still wasn’t family per se. Luckily, there’s fishing.



6 TIPS FOR FISHING WITH [STEP] KIDS

To ensure your fishing trip with your stepchild (or any child) is a positive experience, keep this advice in mind:

1. **Pick the right spot.** Select a place that is well-stocked with fish. While the overall experience is what helps bonds you and your stepchild, catching fish sure helps.
2. **Get excited beforehand.** Talk it up. Mark it on the family calendar. If your stepkid is primed for a good time, the day will be memorable no matter what happens.
3. **Manage expectations.** Boost anticipation but be a realist. Talk with your stepchild about the possibility of not catching fish and why that might happen. Also talk about when to keep or release fish.
4. **Be prepared.** Not just with fishing gear, but also food, drinks, sunscreen, bug spray, chairs and other supplies for the day.
5. **Assign tasks.** Engage your stepchild before you leave and while you’re fishing. Have them help pack up the car. Teach them how to put a worm on a hook. Let them release the fish. The experience should be focused on them.
6. **Keep it short.** The younger the kid, the shorter their attention span, even if the fish are biting. Call it quits while they’re still having fun, so they’ll want to do it again.



TROUT TEST. Four years ago, Jack and I officially tied the knot. Perhaps that triggered the notion among our kids that the status quo for the previous six years was continuing indefinitely. By coincidence, Zoe passed her hunter safety course that summer and became a full member of our outdoor family team. That fall, she accompanied Jack and me on big-game and bird-hunting trips. She let me teach her to shoot a shotgun on our local skeet field and then a rifle at our annual elk camp. The next summer, she accompanied us on a backcountry fishing trip.

One of Jack’s and my passions is hiking into backcountry lakes to fly cast for trout. Zoe has always been a strong hiker, often the first to reach a destination. This particular trek was no exception. She sat on the pebbly shore, eating a granola bar, when Jack and I arrived. She looked smug, but her confidence quickly waned when she tried to cast. Her experience with a fly rod was limited to only a time or two, and the breeze was just stiff enough to make it challenging. After four attempts, her line piled up in a big tangle.

“Want some help?” I offered. An hour later, she was ready to try again. I told her to cast downwind using only a short amount of line. We took a step, then cast, took another step and cast again, finding new water with each fling of the fly. Soon we had covered about 50 yards. I was so pleased that she let me coach her. And she was happy because, on the next cast, she hooked her first rainbow trout on a fly.

“Fish!” she shouted with glee. As if to acknowledge her accomplishment, the fish jumped. When she brought it to net a few minutes later, joy and pride emanated from her. Talk about a bonding experience for both us.

Bonding with a stepchild isn’t easy. One needs to work at it, but you can’t force it. In many cases, you’re a part-time parent, and your spouse’s ex might have a different way of doing things. The older the kid when you enter his or her life, the harder it is. On the bright side, kids respond to meaningful time spent with parents, and by extension step-parents. For Zoe and me, our time together outdoors helped us get to know each other. It’s always quality time when we can talk. It’s exercise and fresh air. And it’s fun, especially when we catch fish together. 🐟

A regular contributor to Colorado Outdoors, Lisa Ballard is an award-winning freelance writer and photographer. www.lisaballardoutdoors.com.

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