

YOUTH SHOOTING

BY MIKE WARE

PEOPLE ARE headed to the range in droves. Everywhere I turn new and renewed shooters are seeking places to shoot, practice, and hone their skill. I absolutely love seeing this direction and trend. We're getting a ton of questions through the shop about good training practices, training courses, shooting techniques, and range locations. I'm getting a lot of questions on youth weapon choice and this is a great topic to fully grasp, as I believe we can build a better youth training scenario if we put some extra time and effort into our approach.

I think we assume that since we can shoot safely ourselves, that we can teach safety to our sons and daughters. This is almost always true, but there are some things that we should consider so we can make that learning curve easier for our young and safer through the act of shooting and instruction.

First we need a plan. I like to think back to what it was like the very first time I fired

a rifle. Yes, I'd had a bb gun for ages and could pick off a running squirrel at 50 yards atop a horse and blindfolded. Ok, maybe I wasn't that good, but as a pup that's how I saw myself. Thus, we need to teach reality right out of the chute. Understanding lethality and having a thorough discussion on what weapons can do if used improperly is paramount. Those initial instructions can set the tone and provide the healthy respect for a firearm that we all seek, so don't take that conversation for granted. I

shared my range with a friend and his son not that long ago and he asked me to sit in on their initial foray into the shooting arts. My friend had spent a great deal of time thinking about what he was going to say, how he'd respond to the many questions his son would have, and did a really great job. I noticed one area he was light in and was glad to lend a hand when the moment was right.

It's been my experience that you can preach all day long, but if someone doesn't

come to a conclusion himself or herself, they may not truly wrap their minds around what you're hoping they'll come to understand. Simply put, those decisions we arrive at ourselves are held with more conviction than those we're told to believe. I don't seek to scare anyone about a gun's use, but the fact is we're remiss if we don't make that fully clear. After my friend's initial session, this young man was really excited and had a great time. I popped into the house, grabbed a one-gallon milk



jug full of frozen water and placed it downrange for the young man to target. He was able to place a really great shot on it with the first shot. We made everything safe and walked downrange. As we were inspecting the awesome destruction of the block of ice, I slowly poked the young man's belly once and said "Which do you think is harder? This chunk of solid ice or you?" to which I could instantly see his little gears turning. I was able to make him think, without being harsh or cruel, and he remarked later that morning that a weapon held a great deal of power and he understood why our basic safety rules had to be in place all the time. That was exactly the outcome I had hoped for. He applied what he saw with the decimated ice block and thought through the scenarios that could come to fruition if the safety rules were ignored. He was in full comprehension why the safety rules were in place.

When I was a knee high on a grasshopper, we had the four basic safety rules. Today safety rules have expanded far beyond the classics:

1. All guns are always loaded.
2. Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy.
3. Keep your finger off the trigger till your sights are on the target.
4. Identify your target, and what is behind it.

Whether you're taking NRA courses or

a custom curriculum, safety rules actively practiced and enforced are our chief concerns. Know the safety rules, be able to recite them, and provide examples to make them clear in the minds of those you seek to teach.

Weapon choice can make all the difference on your introduction of others into the shooting world. This applies to every person of every age we seek to include. While the intent of this article is to key in on how we are preparing our youth, I see plenty of room to apply this to our friends, family, and the spouses we introduce as well.

I've watched a group of people bring their girlfriends to the range and hand them an S&W Model 29 and have them fire the 44mag as their first firearm experience. Their laughter at seeing her astonishment is only drowned by the sound of screaming voices in my head, pleading with me not to walk over and paint their back porches red. The success we have and our first impressions with a firearm can set the tone of our entire reflection on weapons in general. If you hate what you just experienced, why would you ever consider heading back to the range for a second dose? Let's avoid being the moron who destroys a persons first shooting experience, shall we?

I always recommend starting small for several reasons. People tend to gravitate towards achievement, so why not provide

something likely to bring about some success? If we have some initial success then we're likely to give it a second whirl, right? I love a good 22LR chambered weapon for this. The 22 isn't real loud, doesn't have substantial recoil, and is easy to manage overall. While current 22LR ammo prices range from just plain nutty to the cost of handing over your first born, most all of history will show that the 22 is easy to get, costs little, and can be found everywhere. Don't worry, it is a matter of time, and the current genre of crazy will subside.

I like 22 rifles to begin shooting. They are a bit easier to steady than pistols and keep the muzzle further away from you, so they provide a stable platform in which to begin. There are tons of great little rifles out there, but you have to consider their size, features, and configurations as well. For years if you wanted to pick up an inexpensive 22 rifle it came in only a few cheap configurations. There were and are plenty of greats, but the inexpensive stuff has been pretty ho hum. The classic little rifles where you pull a cocking piece

back with one hand while holding the rifle with another are adequate, but not what I'd recommend if you had other choices. Small rifles like these may be short in length and stock, but many are pretty large through the hand grip area. This can be tough for young folks and those with small hands.

If I were to specify a dream 22 for youth instruction, it would be short in stock length, small in the grip area, have a safety that could be engaged throughout the action cycling process, and have a nice little set of peep sights. Having a rifle that allows the safety to be engaged continually is a big deal. When you're teaching first shots to a person, you don't want to have to tell them about keeping their finger off the trigger, and then make the exception to pull the trigger with your right hand finger, while lowering the cocking piece down on a loaded round with your left hand. This contradicts your teaching and is the only way to empty a weapon other than firing it after you've loaded a chamber.

While that was an easy and inexpensive method to affordable 22 rifles back in the day, they literally create some of the scenarios we seek to avoid in modern training and weaponry. Lever

actions can be very similar depending on model. Some require you to pull the trigger and lower the hammer on a loaded round if you want to make the weapon "safe" and stop shooting. If one of these little units is all you have, then use it while counseling your student on what attributes are and aren't present with this weapon. Otherwise, see if you can find a nice little rifle heavy on safety features and function. The single shot or repeating bolt action rifles with a great safety mechanism are intrinsically safe and I encourage folks to consider them as a purchase. There are models available like the little Savage Rascal that work well for youth instruction. Many others exist, so pay close attention to features and size while doing your shopping.

We've covered a few things like weapon choice, safety, and some instruction considerations, but I want to circle back to shooting success again. There are many ways to achieve positive results, but I really believe that something with 'interactivity' seems to give us an immediate response that is favorable. I believe

that shooting paper is key to accuracy and teaching the art of 'aim small-miss small' but hitting a target that moves or reacts when taking your first shots lets you know instantly you did it. Swinging steel flappers, bouncy balls, polymer prairie dogs, and the venerable Ol' soup can work real well. The instant reflection of hitting a target tells a person that their instructor's lesson worked. It drills home that when the safety rules were exercised, the sights were leveled, and all the good practices were actively engaged, that instant triumphs are continually in our future.

A positive first shots scenario is hard to express in writing. But we all know it when we are part of the experience. My formula is the following: Safety first, make a plan, choose a weapon wisely, and set up scenarios that lend themselves to immediate success and visual gratification. If you follow this template it'll be hard to not enjoy your day. More importantly, the folks you are spending the range time with, will enjoy the day as well. The hands on positive experiences make the continual safety discussions easy and welcome. Now get out to the range and take somebody new with you... 🦊

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