

Ways to Wreck a Young Deer Hunter

by Dave Maas

Editor's Note: Today's feature first appeared in ScoutlookWeather.com is reprinted with permission. It's a great reference for those of us who have children (or grandchildren) we want to introduce to hunting.

As a father of two beginning gun hunters – sons ages 10 and 12 – I've learned a few tips that could stack the odds in your favor when it comes to providing your kids with a positive first experience in the deer woods. I've also discovered some of the major pitfalls.

This article isn't meant to cover every aspect of a first firearms deer hunt, and I don't pretend to have all the answers. Whether you choose to take my recommendations to heart are certainly up to you, but let me say this: My dad – the man who taught me to deer hunt – passed along this advice about life when I was 12: "Dave, a smart man learns by other people's mistakes, while a stupid man learns only by his own mistakes."

Mistake No. 1: Focusing on antlers. You watch hunting shows on TV, your kids watch them, and it's easy to fall into the big-buck trap. There will be plenty of time down the road to hold out for mature bucks. During a child's first deer hunt, let him or her shoot whichever deer they wish, provided it's a legal animal. Enough said.

Mistake No. 2: Too much gun. I love my dad dearly, but when I look back at my upbringing as a deer hunter, it's a minor miracle I stuck with it. I killed my first whitetail with a lightweight Winchester Model 94 .30-30 lever-action (no recoil pad) that kicked like hell, and

my next deer gun – a Christmas gift during junior high – was a .30-06 bolt-action. I was scared to death of that "cannon" and closed my eyes when pulling the trigger. I still own both rifles but my kids have never shot them – and won't until they're adults.

Want to wreck a young shooter? Ask them to shoot a magnum rifle; they'll hold the stock away from their shoulder thinking it's going to hurt. When they pull the trigger, the scope comes back and...gotcha...leaving a nasty scope cut. This young hunter's smiling, but chances are pretty high he'll have to battle flinching in the future.

My two sons learned to shoot with BB-guns and then moved up to .22 rifles. They both shot their first deer with a soft-shooting but deadly youth-model bolt-action in .243 Win. Each boy shot the .243 a few times at the range (I've discovered that too much range time can lead to flinching), and we did a lot of dry-firing practice at deer targets, wildlife calendars, etc.

Ammo advice: To maximize blood trails on deer when using a small cartridge such as a .243 Win., choose a bullet that expands fast but still provides an exit hole. My favorite is the Nosler Ballistic Tip. In my experience, deer shot in the shoulder with this bullet often drop in their tracks, and those taken through both lungs (no shoulder) run less than 50 yards.

Mistake No. 3: Relying on open sights. Nothing turns off a young hunter faster than wounding an animal, so outfit their first deer gun with a scope. You don't have to spend an arm and a leg, but if you buy top quality the first time, the scope should last a lifetime.

Scope tip: Bigger doesn't

always mean better. The youth-model bolt-action I rigged for my sons is topped with a Leupold VX-1 2-7X; it's a killer scope I've used for 40 years. This small-sized optic has plenty of eye relief (3.7 to 4.2 inches, depending on power) and sits low on the barrel so the kids obtain the proper cheek weld when aiming. We set the scope on 4X while waiting on the stand, then bump up the power if needed after spotting a deer. Because of my sons' early successes on whitetails with the VX-1, they'll probably be Leupold fans for life.

Mistake No. 4: Skipping ear protection. Parents and mentors are generally good about insisting that young hunters use ear protection while sighting-in firearms, but they don't follow through in the field. Kids – and adults for that matter – who are sensitive to gun recoil will shoot better with hearing protection in place, and it's simply a smart idea if you care about your long-term hearing. While ear plugs are better than nothing, muffs do a better job of blocking gun blast.

Innovative new product: One option to bulky shooting muffs is the lightweight and collapsible Ear Shield from Otis Technology. It uses Sound Reduction Chamber Technology to shield your ears from high-decibel noise, while at the same time allowing you to hear other sound frequencies such as speech. In other words,

you and your child can wear Ear Shields (one size fits all) in a deer blind, whisper to each other about a possible shot opportunity, and still be fully protected when the trigger is pulled. And I'm saving the best for last: Ear Shield (31dB model) cost is only \$25, so you can outfit an entire family of deer hunters.

Mistake No. 5: No shooting rest: If there is ever a time to be ultraconservative with shot placement, it's when your son or daughter attempts to tag their first deer. My sons practice shooting with aid of a bipod or tripod, and that's the only way they'll shoot in the field. Period.

In addition to insisting on a solid rest, I limit their shot distance to about 75 yards. Yes, I know that a .243 Win. with a topnotch bullet is deadly at many times that range, but what's the point? The idea here is the thrill of the hunt and making great memories, and this happens best at close range. My 12-year-old has shot three whitetails with a rifle at the following ranges: 40 yards, 50 yards, 30 yards. My 10-year-old killed his first deer with a rifle at 30 yards. Close is better than far, especially when little hands are shaking with excitement.

Mistake No. 6: Lack of communication: Kids will learn the best time to shoot, but only with proper instruction, and this needs to happen prior to the hunt, as well as during the hunt. You can't assume everything you

teach a youngster will automatically register in their brain and then leave them to make the right decisions in the heat of the moment. It's all about communication.

During a hunt with one of my sons, I'm sitting beside him (double ladder stand or ground blind) close enough that he can hear me whisper. When a deer is spotted, we whisper back and forth about the situation. We're talking about the scenario (fawn, doe, wariness level, distance, shot angle) and I'm reminding him to breathe. If everything works out and he is about to get a close-range shot, I initiate the shooting sequence by bleating loudly at the deer, no matter whether it's walking or not. During our dry-fire practice sessions, each son knows that he pulls the trigger only after I make a bleat, so we carry this ritual into the woods. My sons appreciate that I take the timing decision off their plates. In fact, the most common comment during our sit is often "You'll bleat first, right Dad?"

Mistake No. 7: Insisting a child field-dress the deer. I know some old-school mentors will disagree with me on this one, but I simply don't see the benefit to forcing a kid to jump in and tackle the job on his or her own. Should you use the project as a teaching moment? Absolutely! And if a

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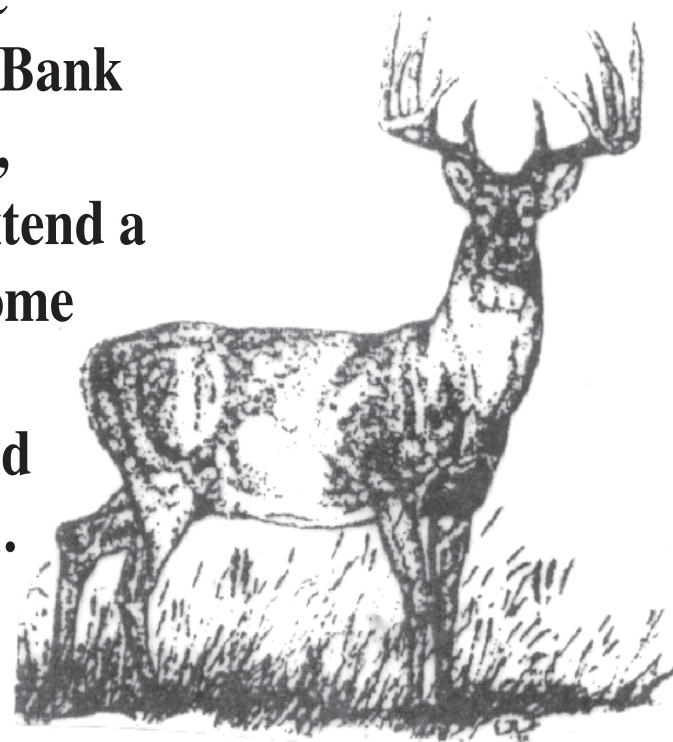
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