



What are we really teaching our children when we teach them to fish?

Many years ago, when my husband needed to entertain our four-year-old son for the day, he decided to take him fishing. Never a great fisherman himself, he begged or borrowed the gear they'd need, and they looked every bit the part as they set off for a local river.

Later that evening, as I kissed my son goodnight, he asked me "Mummy, does fishing hurt the fish?"

It was a question I'd been pushing to the back of my mind all day. I told him honestly that I didn't know, but I thought it might. He thought it might, too, and decided he'd rather not go again. I found I was very relieved.

I'd always suspected that fishing might not be quite the benign pursuit its advocates would have us believe. However, my beliefs weren't really put to the test until my fourth child befriended the son of an extremely keen fisherman. Before I voiced an opinion I felt I owed it to him to get my facts straight. What I found has left me wondering what we're really teaching our children when we teach them to fish.

The myth that fish feel no pain

If they think of it at all, most people seem to believe that fish don't mind being caught – that somehow they don't feel pain. The closer you look, the less likely this seems to be.

Physiologically, fish are very similar to mammals. They're vertebrates with a brain and a central nervous system. They have pain receptors all over their bodies, including their lips and mouths. They even release endorphins and enkephalins – the morphine-like hormones whose sole purpose in humans appears to be helping us to cope with extreme pain.

If we do something to a fish that we would find painful, its body reacts in a very similar way. It will also behave in a similar way.

In one experiment, toadfish – a species which makes sounds audible to humans – were given electric shocks with an electrode. At first, they grunted and moved away. Soon, just the sight of the electrode was enough to make them grunt and move away. They even went without food for long periods of time in order to avoid being touched by the electrode.

Not surprisingly, the scientists concluded that fish are aware and conscious beings, and that pain and fear are extremely powerful forces in modifying their behaviour.

The myth that it's OK as long as you throw them back

How many times have you heard a fisherman say “I always throw them back” as if this makes everything OK? Unfortunately, this practice has a lot more to do with making us feel better than helping the fish.

As far back as 1979, it was found that fish caught and returned to the water frequently died. A recent study by Texas Tech University put a figure on it. Researchers found that 62 per cent of fish caught in so-called ‘catch and release’ tournaments were dead within six days. Not one of the control fish died in this time.

At least when we eat what we catch, we're teaching children the realities of where this type of food comes from. When we fish purely for entertainment, rip the hook out of the fish's mouth and toss it back like an old boot, are we teaching them anything other than absolute contempt for life?

The myth that life doesn't count

The time my son went fishing he had no idea about the physiology of fish or scientific experiments. But he intuitively knew that those fish didn't want to be caught.

He saw living creatures fighting to stay alive, and he felt in his heart that he was hurting them. Most children brought up to respect living things would react in the same way – until adults they trust convince them otherwise.

The majority of parents who take their children fishing are good, kind people. They want their children to be compassionate and caring. They'd be devastated if they found their children deliberately hurting a kitten or a bird.

They care enough about their children's welfare and development to vet TV and computer games and worry about the influence of the Internet. They're concerned that repeated exposure to violence and aggression has a desensitising effect on young minds.

Perhaps it does. But will it be any more desensitising than repeatedly hurting and killing living creatures for your own entertainment?

Respect for life

For years we've had every reason to believe that fish don't enjoy being caught any more than a kitten would, yet we continue to ignore the evidence, and to teach our children to do the same.

Is it simply because a fish isn't cute and cuddly? Or is it because our parents – the people we trusted to help us understand the difference between compassion and cruelty – have always assured us that fish simply don't count?

Whatever the reason, isn't it time we broke the cycle, put the tackle away for good and started teaching our children to respect and be kind to all living things?