

## Starting A Youngster Shooting

Dear Technoid,

What do you think is the best way to start youngsters into the sport. What guns/gauges do you prefer? Would I be better off with a single shot 28 ga. or a youth model 870? I shoot mostly skeet and would probably be starting with easy targets like station 7.

Thanks, Mark

Dear Mark:

I feel that the best way to start youngsters out is with a 20 gauge semi-automatic. Remington's 1100 comes in a youth model with a short stock and a 21" barrel. I would prefer starting them with the 1100 LT-20 field model with a 26" barrel if they are a bit bigger. You have to match the gun to the size and strength of the shooter.

Beretta also makes a line of 20 gauge autos. The 12 gauge Beretta autos are flat out better guns than the current 12 gauge Remington autos.

I would pick a 20 gauge auto over a 20 gauge pump due to recoil. A light 20 can really kick after a few shells. The LAST thing that you want to do to your kid is have the gun beat him up. You want him to love the sport, not dread it. Stick with the autos.

I like 20 better than 28 because patterns are a bit bigger and shells and gun selection is greater. In an auto, the extra recoil of the 20 is not a concern.

If you are concerned (as you should be) with the problem of a hidden or forgotten shell in the magazine, simply put a wooden dowel into the ENTIRE length of the magazine in place of the magazine plug. This makes the gun into a single shot and the dowel is easy to remove later.

Stock length: always a problem with youngster's guns. Many parents don't want to cut a stock for fear that the gun will "lose resale value". If the gun does not fit the kid, he is not going to hit much with it, will not like the sport and you will then be selling the gun for sure.

Go ahead and cut the stock to get it to fit. Save the piece you cut off so that it can be glued back on later as the child grows. OR, gas gun parts are pretty cheap- buy two stocks, save one and cut the other. Jeffs Outfitters, Cape Girardeau, MO often sells inexpensive semi-auto stocks.

One thing to be aware of when cutting the stock of a semi-auto: On both the Beretta and the Remington, the action spring housing extends within a couple of inches of the butt plate. This will limit just how short you can make the stock. You may want to pull the recoil pad and take a look at this before you buy a particular gun.

Women and youngsters need higher combs than the average adult man because they have smaller faces and smaller cheekbone to eye distances. Be prepared to shim the stock up slightly when

you are fitting it to the young shooter. You can build up the top of the stock with tape if they need more than just a little. The Berettas come with adjustment shims, Remington does not.

Now that you have the gun, just how do you start? As you suggest, the skeet field and easy targets are the right way. The most important thing about teaching a new shooter (young or old) is to instill confidence. You do this by making sure that they hit their first bunch of targets. You do not do it by forcing them to shoot an entire round of skeet from all stations just to show them how hard the game is and how good you are. I am always surprised to see people do this. As a good coach you should take pride in your student's success and do everything possible to achieve it.

For some new shooters Low 7 can be a little tricky because it requires a dead gun and does not give the student very much time. I prefer Low 1 for a learning target. The student has plenty of time to view the target and gets to swing on it a bit, which actually helps.

I do not start the complete novice shooter out with shells right away. I have them do a lot of dry firing. Here is the sequence I have found quite useful. The very first thing that you do is to do an eye check for cross dominance. Make sure to start the student off shouldering the gun on the same side as his strong eye. This will save untold misery later. Then I show the student how to stand on the station- right handers face their belt buckles to the front right corner of the pad. They are told to do this at all stations. It is simple to remember and very close to correct almost everywhere. Fine tuning comes much later.

Once they are taught how to stand, I show them how to hold the gun. Usually beginners will hold their head too erect. You want them to keep their heads up a little, but push their faces forward on the stock. Some do it naturally, some really struggle here. Spend however much time it takes to get this right before going any further.

Once they know how to stand and hold the gun, take the gun out of their hands. The gun is heavy to a new shooter. Take it from their hands at every opportunity. You will not notice the weight, but I guarantee that they will. Now throw a couple of Low 1s for the student to just look at. Get them used to calling "Pull". Do not let them use any other word. Teach them to call pull loudly. Mumbled calls or odd call words will cause them to suffer a life time of late pulls if they ever really get into clay shooting. Start them right.

Now that they know what the bird looks like and how to call for it, pull a few targets and have them point at the bird with their forend hand. Do not use the trigger hand. Check and see that they are pointing right at the bird as it comes across- this will confirm your cross dominance test and get them used to swinging with the bird and taking its line.

If they do everything right so far, give them the EMPTY gun. No shells You are keeping all the shells in YOUR pocket. The student never touches a shell. The new shooter is never permitted to load the gun himself. Show the student how to check that the gun really is empty and then show him how to close the gun on the empty chamber. Now have him dry fire the trigger and recock the action a couple of times to get used to it. You can use snap caps if you want to, but the autos

do not need them and I really feel that the student is less confused with a totally empty gun than one with snap caps flopping out on the ground when he opens the action.

This done, have the student dry fire at some Low 1s. Dry firing (actually pulling the trigger on snap cap or an empty chamber) at a moving target is absolutely the best possible training aid. Let him dry fire at three targets and take the gun out of his hands while you critique him. This is where you start to become the shooting coach. An experienced coach will be able to easily tell if the new shooter would have hit the targets he dry fired at. Have him dry fire in groups of three, handing the gun to you and resting in between, until you are absolutely, positively certain that he is on the bird and will hit it. Make sure that he is getting his lead right and is, most importantly, following through. You want to make sure he hits the bird the first time he uses a shell. This is important.

Keep dry firing until you are absolutely, positively certain that he is on the target. Then, and only then, give him ONE shell. If he hits with it (and he should- you were CERTAIN he was accurately dry firing), then give him another- up to three in a row. As soon as he misses, you go back to dry firing a bit. Do not let him get into the "Gee, I missed. Give me another." syndrome. Misses happen, but when they do it is immediately back to the basics of dry firing. The student has to EARN the right to put a shell in the gun. This constant dry firing all sounds pretty heartless and Teutonic (the technique is popular in Germany), but it will make the student understand just how important each shot is and how hard he must concentrate on it.

The first day I would just do Low 1 and not any other stations if the student is young. If things go smoothly you might add in High 7 after that, but I would not give them too much in one day. Afterwards I would teach them the incomers first, then the outgoers and finally the doubles.

Make sure that they learn each bird well before going on to the next. At the beginning of each practice session, make sure to shoot a few of each of the birds that the student has already learned. When they miss have them dry fire. All during the learning process you should be doing at least three dry fires for each live round used. Do not look at dry firing as wasting targets, look at it as saving shells. You will be amazed how quickly a student can learn sight picture and follow through when he is not being kicked by a gun. Did you know that everyone, even the most experienced shooter, blinks when the gun goes off?

Finally, make sure that the student keeps a log book or shooting diary. The diary should include what the student learned that day and what they are going to concentrate on learning at the next lesson. A diary is important, so make sure that they keep one and read it just before they go out to shoot so that they know what their goal for the day will be.

Sorry that this has been so long, but getting youngsters started is vital to our sport and it is important that it be done correctly. I have coached International Skeet at every level, from beginner to Olympic team members. In every case, even with the very best, one tries to instill confidence in the student- the certain knowledge that if they do everything right that they will break the target. When they do not break a bird, they have to know that if they immediately return to their bedrock basics that they can break the rest of them. I strongly believe that dry firing in practice builds confidence and technique better than just blowing off endless rounds of

ammo. Dry firing is a major component of almost every major championship training program. It works as well for the beginner as it does for the elite shooting athlete.

Best regards,  
Bruce Buck  
Shotgun Report's Technoid