

When To Give A Child That First Knife

By Mike Haskew

One knife-related debate that likely never will be fully resolved centers on the appropriate age for a child to be given, carry and handle a knife. Indeed, there may well be no single answer, and parents and responsible adults everywhere wrestle with it continually.

Children mature at different ages and some will be capable of taking on greater responsibility at an earlier age than others. The consensus for knife safety is that parental involvement in education and assessment of a child's readiness for such a rite of passage is key.

"The way we go at it really depends on the amount of parental involvement and instruction on how to handle a knife," noted Rod Reid of Shepherd Hills Cutlery, which has hosted the Camp Case for Kids during its annual Celebration in the Ozarks for the past decade. "As a matter of fact, what we do is take kids into Camp Case as early as age 6. We do recommend that the parents keep the knife in their control and start out teaching the kids knife safety. The parents are then able to judge how much responsibility the child is able to handle."

The annual Camp Case activities are held at Shepherd Hills Cutlery in Lebanon, Missouri. Parents do not participate directly in Camp Case, but children are taught knife safety and learn about such things as handle and blade materials, and how to read a Case tang stamp. In 2005, a total of 325 kids ages 6-16 attended 10 different Camp Case classes during the Celebration of the Ozarks.

"All the Camp Case instructors are professionals and they know what the children can digest," Rod said. "They don't teach over the kids' heads. Camp Case is a wonderful educational tool, and the kids can do these things with a family member. That's how important we think the instruction is. The instructors don't make things too technical; it's an entertainment activity. "One reason why there weren't a lot of young people involved in knife collecting in the past is that there were very limited opportunities for them. We like to give them such an opportunity. The average age of the knife collector has gone down considerably now. Younger people can have fun with collecting and be safe."

As for the proper introduction of a knife to a child, Rod and others recommend a pocketknife rather than a fixed blade. Relatively small knives, suited better for a child's hand, are also recommended.

"I'd say giving a folding knife is more appropriate than a fixed blade," Rod commented. "The child can carry the knife without having it open. The small folding hunter or the Case peanut or tiny trapper make good first knives, and we do encourage parents to start their kids out with smaller knives."

Whether at Camp Case or at home, stressing the basics of knife safety is the place to start. A few of the fundamentals include do not run with a knife open, always cut or sharpen away from yourself, and never treat a knife like a toy. Teaching knife safety builds self-esteem in children and brings them to the realization that they are now able to handle a knife in certain circumstances whereas they were not allowed to in the past.

Priority One

Knifemaker Edmund Davidson performed career-day programs related to knifemaking and knife safety for student groups in his local school system for 10 years. He agrees that parental involvement is priority one.

“I think kids should be introduced to knives as early as possible,” Edmund said, “but this does come along with the involvement of a parent or responsible adult. A knife holds fascination to a young person, and when someone takes out a knife that has all sorts of little gadgets to it, the child’s interest is right there. Then, it’s up to the adult to carefully instruct the young person as to what a knife is—a tool, not a weapon.”

During his years of school presentations, Edmund said that the response was almost always positive on the part of children and adults. He worked with youngsters in 1st-12th grades and found that the greatest response came consistently from kids aged 8-13.

“If I was going to suggest an age, I guess it would be around 8,” he commented. “Once a child that age has been taught the proper ins and outs of knife safety, then a small pocketknife is appropriate. You would need a sheath for a fixed blade, and you can’t carry it so well. Also, in today’s climate a big knife can be a big problem.

“I would first give the child a small factory piece and then allow them to grow into something larger down the road. It should be a quality product so that they’re introduced to a well-made knife. Explain to them where you can and cannot carry the knife after all the aspects of safety have been covered.”

One point Edmund finds ironic is that parents often hand their 16-year-old sons and daughters the keys to a car and allow them to drive after instruction in what is perceived as a socially acceptable practice. The handling and carrying of a knife, however, often conjures up something of a different response from observers.

“It seems very fashionable for parents to give their child a car, which is a dangerous thing and requires responsibility,” he noted. “That’s acceptable but somehow giving a pocketknife isn’t. The ‘knives-bad-automobiles-good’ scenario is a strange concept. In either case, the maturity level has got to be appropriate. There are people who are incredibly accident-prone who will hurt themselves with a butter knife. So, it has a lot to do with the individual.”

A Cultural Thing

One steadfast conclusion, noted ABS master smith Larry Harley, is that a child who is responsible with a knife also will be responsible with a gun, an automobile, or steel heated to 2,000°F and up. Larry and fellow ABS master smith Wes Byrd have shared responsibility as co-chairs of the American Bladesmith Society’s Youth Program for several years. Larry stressed the importance of instruction but that culture has something to do with knife use as well.

“In some native tribes, kids start using knives when they are about 3 years old, or as soon as they are able to pick one up,” Larry related. “I have seen video of 3-year-old kids using machetes. I guess I started playing with cheap Japanese knives when I was 3 or 4 years old. My daddy made knives, so I had access to them early. I remember him showing me how to sharpen a knife with a switchblade Case Texas Toothpick.

“If someone doesn’t have access to knives at an early age, I wouldn’t expect them to be doing that kind of thing, but teaching respect for the tools they use on a regular basis is part of the way of life of some indigenous natives,” Larry continued. “Also, in rural America kids have opportunities to use knives more than just in the kitchen. You teach responsibility with knives, but you also teach responsibility with everything every day and hope that teaching carries over.” Larry is campaigning to initiate a Boy Scout merit badge in bladesmithing and favors the Scout teaching model in which Bear Cub Scouts learn the proper way to pass a knife back and forth, how to whittle, and more. He has conducted seminars in bladesmithing for children and worked with kids as young as 6 or 7 in using small hammers and anvils to forge forks.

“I enjoy teaching,” Larry remarked, “and it’s most gratifying with the kids because it opens their eyes to it, and they don’t bring the prejudices to it that adults do. There’s a whole list of etiquette and technique you can teach. Last year, we had a parent-child weekend that we hope to expand in the future.”

Placing a knife in the hands of a child is a sobering moment. However, with proper instruction and supervision the event will be remembered in a positive way—and for a lifetime.

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