



Parents' Guide to Starting Music Lessons...

Now that you've decided to start your child on music lessons, you will want the experience to be a positive one - for both you and your child. To help that happen, we present the following. Your role as parent is important and there are many ways that you can help create a positive learning environment.

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All Children Can Learn to Play

Many parents believe that only "talented" children should learn to play a musical instrument. They start their children on music lessons with the idea that lessons will continue only if

I. their child practices diligently (with the same attitude they would have if they were taking the lessons)

II. their child makes smooth and steady progress.

To say the least, few children practice diligently and few children make smooth and steady progress continually throughout their formative years; few, that is, with the exception of those children that have a tremendous amount of parental support.

Research has proven that it is a child's environment, not his heredity which determines whether or not he'll succeed at learning to play a musical instrument. Many people see children of musical families doing well on a particular instrument and mistakenly conclude that the reason for the child's success is inherited talent. They fail to see that such families place a high priority on providing an environment that allows a child to work to his full potential. It is the child's environment that educates him, not heredity. Let me give you a further example: a baby born in France, if allowed to be brought up in France will learn to speak French. Take that same baby and put him in a Chinese household and he will surely learn to speak Chinese. You see, all babies are born with the ability to speak but it is their environment that ultimately determines what language they learn.

Children Learn at Different Rates

There are many areas of musical skills that children have to develop in order to play well. There are rhythmic skills, hand-eye coordination, pitch recognition and relationships, memorization skills, finger dexterity and other muscular problems to name a few. Some children excel in one area and others in a different area. Few students excel in all areas. A child must be allowed to progress at his own rate. With the proper support, every area of musical skill will be mastered. When your child eventually learns to play his instrument well, will it really matter to you (in hindsight) how long it took him to master his eighth notes?

Remember our baby analogy: No matter how hard you try to teach a baby to walk, he's not going to take his first steps until he's ready. As far as the baby's language is concerned: It will not matter at which age an infant says his first words provided he can speak fluently by the time he's out of school. Each child will progress at his or her own rate.

The Positive Effects of Music Lessons on Children

Many parents innately sense that music lessons will be beneficial to their children. However, most parents have no idea of just how many musical skills are common to other areas of learning. Music lessons develop concentration, the ability to memorize, develop coordination, sensitivity to patterns and sensitivity to beauty. They promote self-esteem and give children the feeling - from a young age - that success and high levels of accomplishment can be achieved through perseverance and the setting of high standards.

Most importantly, education in the arts is really the education of feeling. And the role of music in developing and refining our feelings in a computerized, impersonal world cannot be overemphasized. Though you may have started music lessons with the idea that they'll be a fun "extra" for your child, it is important to understand that music lessons are very bit as important as any subject in school. Without that dedication the temptation will be too great to stop the lessons any time the going gets rough.

The Role of the Parent

The ideal situation is for the parent to be present at every lesson. In the famous Suzuki method of teaching, the parents are considered the "teacher at home" and come to each lesson with notebook in hand. They learn along with their children and follow the teacher's instructions when practicing at home. The parents do not actually do the playing of the instrument but understand the assignment sufficiently so as to reinforce everything the teacher says at the lesson. It's no wonder that the Suzuki's have such a high success rate. The relationship of the teacher, parent and the student is thought of as a triangle. If one side does not do its part, the rest suffer.

At the lesson the parent's role should be that of an interested observer rather than that of an active participant. Don't be afraid to sit in on the music lesson. If some aspect of the assignment is unclear to you, chances are that it is unclear to your child as well. Notice how the teacher praises the child for each step in the learning process. Do the same thing at home. Nothing motivates a child like praise and successful mastery of each step. If your child gets stuck in an area, praise him for the effort of trying to overcome an especially difficult passage. If a baby tries to walk but falls, do you yell at him for falling? Of course not. It's the love and encouragement that makes him want to try again after not succeeding at first. The same will be true of your child at practice time. However, be careful not to praise a child when there is an obvious lack of effort.

At those times, simple encouragement is all that's needed. It never hurts to say "I know you can do it. Remember how you struggled with such and such a part, and eventually mastered it?"

For further motivation, parents can hold mini-recitals at home for friends and relatives. Many times relatives have not heard your child play for months at a time. To them the amount of improvement will be much more easily seen. Remember, you as a parent are seeing a small amount of growth over a long period of time. Relatives see large amounts of growth over what seems like a short period of time.

The Instrument and the Practice Area

Make sure the instrument is located in an area of the house that is relatively free of constant distractions, such as television. The area must be well lighted with additional lighting for the music. In the case of a piano, try not to locate the instrument in such an out-of-the-way place as the basement (if possible). We don't want the child to feel as if he's being banished to Siberia every time he has to practice. The basement, however, is not that bad if the parent will be taking an active role in helping the student to practice. It's been found that loneliness and isolation are two leading causes of poor practice habits.

Make sure the instrument is of sufficient quality, in good working condition, and most importantly, in tune. You can't expect a child to succeed on an instrument that doesn't work correctly or sounds terribly out of tune.

Preparing the Child

Let's face it. Even though you and the teacher are going to provide as much positive reinforcement as possible, it's not going to be all roses. The parent can lay a solid foundation for years of sound progress by preparing the student in advance as to what to expect from his music lessons. The parent can say, "You've asked us to give you music lessons, and we will be glad to do so. The money we will spend could be spent elsewhere for the family, but because you have demonstrated an interest and because we too understand how it will be beneficial, it is important for you to understand what will be expected from you. At first when the lessons are mostly fun, it will be easy to want to practice your assignment. But, as with anything that is worthwhile, there will be times when it will cost you something. Not in a monetary way but in other ways such as when you're not putting your effort into learning to play. There will be consequences like missing a favorite TV show, or not being able to play with your friends everytime you'd like. There will be times when the going will get tough and you'll think you are not able to master the instrument. At those times, I am going to help you to persevere. You may not always like the way I do that, but I will always be trying to act in your best interest."

Now that the parent has at least sensitized the student to the fact that music lessons will not be all fun, the next step is to use the parents more highly developed organizational skills to set up a routine for the student's often busy life.

Set Priorities

Some students have after-school sports two days per week, dance lessons another day

each week, swimming lessons on yet another day. The list can go on and on. While it may be fine to offer children a wide variety of activities to choose from, what good is it if they can't devote enough time to any one thing to really understand the benefits and rewards of a particular endeavor? Parents must set priorities for their children and not overschedule their free time.

Setting a Practice Time:

Understanding the Importance of Routine

Each time your child's schedule changes, it's important to sit down with your child and figure out what time will work best as practice time. This should be a time that is mutually convenient for both parent and student. If the parent cannot set aside a time each day to sit and practice with the child, the chances of the child doing it himself are slim. Remember, the idea is for the parent to be the teacher at home. Many parents, however, due to their work schedules or other factors, cannot make the commitment to their children to help them practice. In cases such as these, the parents have to be very understanding when problems of lack of practice arise. Other methods have to be employed that will help the child establish a consistent practice routine. Let me say, they are far less effective than total parental commitment and constant positive reinforcement. However, all hope is not lost. Far from it. The parent can still sit down with the child occasionally.

Most importantly, the parent should still try to figure out what practice time will fit best into the student's schedule. This should generally be the same time each day as once a routine is established it makes the rigors of practicing much easier to stomach. Some are evening or afternoon people. Try to find out when your child works best. Many students have an abundance of after-school activities and cannot possibly get into a consistent routine of practice at that time. Some students have favorite TV programs in the evening and would not want to choose between practicing and missing the program. I have found that relating the practice time to some event in the family schedule such as right before or after dinner, or possible as soon as he wakes up works well. Whatever time is chosen, the important thing to remember is that the same time be set aside each day for practice.

What To Do when the Practice Routine is Broken

If for some reason the student is not able to practice at the agreed upon time, a certain amount of time can be made up during the week. However, keeping to a set routine is definitely more beneficial. The student should know that if his practice routine is broken, something else might have to be sacrificed such as having to miss a favorite TV show. If not practicing is the exception to the rule, rather than the rule, there won't be many times when a student is completely unable to do his practicing for the day. Most students will soon set out to test just how firm a rule the practice time routine is. Seemingly good excuses will crop up more and more all in a subtle effort to test the parent's tenacity in this area. If this arises, the parent should take the time to find out why. It may be that the teacher has failed to explain the material properly and the student is confused. Or it may be another reason. Whatever it is, try to get to the bottom of the situation. Make sure that the student enjoys the time he spends with the teacher during the lesson. If the problem seems to be with the teacher or the method

used, go and talk with the teacher. It may be that a change of teacher is called for. However, don't indiscriminately change teachers every time your child hits a low point in his lesson progress. Try to get the teacher's perspective.

When students start to slack off in their progress it could be because they are entering a new stage or level of learning. It is never easy to enter a more difficult and more satisfying level without a little external push. As I said before, when a student starts to miss his practice routine, the parent should sit down with his child and find out the reason.

If it's simply a lack of perseverance, then the parent and child can come up with a reasonable penalty for not practicing. This concept cannot be overemphasized. For without the student having a clear understanding of what the consequences will be for his actions (or in this case his inactions), and those consequences carried out swiftly, the situation will quickly deteriorate. This is not forcing the child to practice and it is certainly not coercion because the child has an active part in deciding the due punishment for his failure to keep his part of the bargain. The penalty may simply be going to bed a half-hour earlier or forfeiture of part or all of his allowance. Or if the problem continues, the penalty can become more severe for each offense in a given week. It's important to note that the parent should not act as a drill sergeant here. There is no need to stand over your child and yell, "Did you do your practicing? Remember you're going to have to go to bed an hour earlier tonight because you missed your practice time". Dr. James Dobson, in his book The Strong-Willed Child, suggests that the parent put a chart on the refrigerator and have the student check off those activities expected to be completed each day. The parent simply has to check the chart to see if it has been done. If it hasn't, the student knows the penalty. This way the burden of conforming to the expected behavior is on the student's back, not the parent's! Once the child knows what is expected of him and the penalties for misconduct, the child will usually be back on the way to a regular routine and progress will soon become evident again. Without some type of penalty, the student will slack off more and more. Remember, there is a big difference between coercion and firm discipline. Parents should never allow themselves to get into a situation where the only time a student practices is when they have to scream and yell. The student should take responsibility for practicing - not the parent. However, the parent should not be afraid to step in and help the student through the inevitable hard times.

Conclusion

By first preparing the student as to what to expect in the lessons and related practice scheduling; by helping the student to get on a routine; and by taking the time to find out the root cause when practicing becomes a drudgery and then taking the corrective action when necessary, the parent will be helping to shape their child's growth and personality development. In addition, the parent will insure that the child gains the valuable experience of being successful in whatever he undertakes, even at a young and tender age.

Through music, children will gain valuable insights into the components that evoke feelings. These insights will help them become emotionally mature adults. In the process of learning a musical instrument, children will benefit from the development of skills which are common to other areas of learning. The value of music lessons is sure, but children cannot do it alone. The parents must be there and be willing to help. It won't always be easy, but be assured, it's well worth it!

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