

Secrets of Effective Music Practice

By Elizabeth Robinson

When we talk about ‘music practice’, parent and teacher may use the same words, but that is often where communication starts and finishes. It is as though we are speaking a different language. What the teacher thinks of as ‘practice’ is often vastly different from what the parent has experienced or can even imagine. No wonder that children who solemnly swear that they have done their practice often fail to progress as fast as expected.

Most parents know intuitively that giving children music lessons is of great value, which will enhance their physical, academic, emotional and cultural development. Many make great sacrifices to give their children this wonderful gift.

As a parent of 3 children who learn music, I am very familiar with the huge challenge that music practice represents. It is hard work encouraging your children over the inevitable hurdles. When children start young, a great deal of parental supervision is necessary for the process to be successful. This is costly to parents in terms of time and effort (not to mention the financial commitment) but the benefits can be awesome.

Shinichi Suzuki, founder of the famous Suzuki Talent Education and the Suzuki Method, commenced violin lessons with children as young as 3 years of age. How could this possibly be effective and what was the key to his success? Each pupil’s parent took on the role and responsibility of being the home-teacher. Suzuki argued that this was essential; he reasoned that he saw the child for half an hour each week but it was the parent who was with the child all day throughout the rest of the week. It is plain who has the greater opportunity for influence – for better and for worse.

And so a co-operative triangle was set up between teacher, child and parent. The parent undertook to attend lessons, to understand each point of technique and supervise daily practice. Below are 10 hints that will make music practice effective so that your child progresses on their instrument. By adopting even some of them, you will begin to see a better return on your music investment.

10 Hints for Effective Music Practice

- 1 Cut down on the number of extra-curricular activities for your child. Let them acquire depth in something rather than a thin spread in many.
- 2 Attend lessons with your child, take notes and ask questions so that you are clear on the goals for that week.
- 3 Say to your child “Come and practise” not “go and practise.” In other words, go with your child to practice – don’t send him to practise in isolation. Read over the lesson notes with your child so you are both clear what must change and how to improve the piece.

- 4 If at all possible, practise early in the morning, rather than late in the day when you are both tired. In most cases, your gain/minute will be much greater in the morning.
- 5 Make daily practice non-negotiable (like teeth cleaning and school homework.)
- 6 Make every repetition accurate and precise. “Practice makes Perfect.” Although it rolls off the tongue so easily, nothing could be further from the truth. Only *perfect* practice makes perfect.

Many children today make little progress with music lessons because of poor practice habits. To train a motor skill, be it a golf swing or fine piano technique, many **correct** repetitions must be performed. “Repetition is the mother of skill.” No matter how sincere you are, if you practise the wrong thing, all you achieve is the ability to perform the wrong action really well. Often children practise in isolation. They may play a passage 6 times over. Parent and child are satisfied that the practice has been done for the day. However, often the child has played the passage 6 different ways. Was any one time correct? Did she actually attend to the changes the teacher requested for the week, or is she still playing the same way as before her lesson? Re-learning the passage correctly after hundreds of incorrect repetitions, is much harder than imprinting the correct pattern initially. It would be better if she had not practised at all!

Encourage your child to listen to the sounds they are making. Don’t assume your child is listening just because they are producing sounds. It is very easy to make a lot of noise on musical instruments without actually paying attention and listening. Train your child to listen and notice what is working and what is not. Did he play with good tone and was he in tune?

- 7 Listen to the model recording (CD) of the pieces you are learning. The idea is to listen for many hours per day. Your child does not have to stop, sit and listen. Just have it playing quietly in the background. Immerse your child in these sounds just as the infant was immersed in the sound of its mother tongue. This will help ‘tune’ the ears and develop beautiful phrasing and musicality. The child will absorb the music in the same effortless way that he learned to speak his own language. Children love what is familiar, so play the same track over and over. If you want your child to love violin, then choose a beautiful track of violin music that you love, program it with ‘repeat’ on your player and let it play over and over softly in the background. The child will associate this music as his own special music. This repetitive listening also motivates the child to want to play that piece one day.
- 8 Don’t even entertain the notion of quitting. Children who know that their parents will not give up in any event know that they have a safety net. They do not put it this way of course, but when they run out of energy to persevere, they look to their parents for strength and encouragement gained through years of maturity. We must not disappoint them! My own children have been devastated over the years when some of my pupils have

quit. They say to me “Mum, why did their mother let them quit?” They know that in our home, when they are going through a low patch, someone will be strong for them, and will not act in haste and allow them to quit. Adults often bemoan the fact that their mother didn’t make them practice. They regret dropping out of music. Remember that “Quitters never win, and winners never quit.”

- 9 Always find something to praise. Catch your child doing something right and be lavish in praise. Chances are you will see that good behaviour again. This is a great principle for everyday living, not just music practice.
- 10 Employ ‘spot’ practise. Identify the spot or bar of music causing trouble. Break it down into small bites (eg separate hands for piano and slow speed). Master each spot through repetition. Then put the pieces back together. By this means learning is broken down into small increments and is made achievable.

If the end of the piece is lagging behind the beginning, then practise ‘back-to-front’ for a few days. Don’t always start practising at the beginning. It is very useful to be able to pick up anywhere throughout the piece, and not have to go back to the beginning. It is a huge bonus if you have a mental block in the middle of a performance if you have trained yourself to start playing anywhere through a piece.

I know that if you put these hints into practice your child will progress more quickly with his instrument. In January this year I produced a parent training CD entitled *Succeed With Music – How To Maximise Your Investment In Kids’ Music Lessons*. It contains these and many hints to help make music practice fun and effective. It is educational and motivational and puts together many of the tips I have learned after helping my own 3 children with music for 11 years, and teaching the violin for over 8 years. I wish I had had the benefit of these hints 11 years ago, instead of having to work it all out for myself. I hope that in listening to the CD that I can save you some time and energy in reinventing the wheel.

Since its launch the CD has been very warmly received by teachers and parents alike. I know it can make a difference to your experience of music education for your family. It is available on-line from www.succeedwithmusic.com for \$35.00. This is a small investment indeed in comparison with the vast amounts of money that are soaked up by tuition fees if we allow our child to cruise along with inefficient and ineffective practice. Parents and teachers have told me how adopting just one or two of the practical ideas has revolutionised the course of their child’s playing forever.

Visit www.succeedwithmusic.com for free articles, parenting tips and lists of music parent resources.

Profile:

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