

Practice tips for Parents by Jan Bogart

It's time to practise. Grab the smelling salt.

Is it time to practise and you, dear parent, find yourself in a complete state of paralysis? Is it a ho-hum affair (more hum than ho ho!)? Do you get a case of the heebie jeebies when practice time approaches? Does practising with your child automatically signal a neuron in each of you to conflagrate (to coin a verb)? Do you push each other's buttons to extremes?

If any of the above grabs your imagination, perhaps some of the ideas for practising listed below will change the status of practice from drab to colorful, from drudgery to fun, from argument to agreement. If you already have fun and are able to make progress easily, this article is not for you, but *please, contribute to the well being of others by sending in some of your ideas for happy, productive practice times. These will be published in future newsletters.*

Your goal is to make music-making a wonderful experience for your child. One day, music will take over and games will be unnecessary. In the meantime, as Dr. Suzuki instructs, rise to the sense of wonder and awe that your child experiences and realize that each moment you spend with your child is unique, not to be repeated ever again. Make it as memorable as you can in a positive way and make it easier for your child to learn by getting those tapes on for a couple of hours, minimum, daily. Have one set in the house, one in the car!

First things first! Be sure that your practice takes place in a separate uncluttered area from the rest of the family whenever possible (or, for pianists, send the family elsewhere). Have the instrument out and ready, rather than wasting precious time and losing your child's attention with mechanical tasks that can be done previously. Be prepared! Know what you are hoping to cover in this session. Be prepared to alter your plan if required, but above all, have a plan in your mind to start with. Whenever possible, ask questions to involve your child. Collude rather than collide.

FOR THE YOUNGER CHILD

1. Try to make practice time a daily event at the same time. This makes it as inevitable as having a meal or doing one's homework.
2. Early morning is the best time, if you can manage it.
3. The very littlest children profit from a number of one or two minute practices a day. Singing and drilling finger numbers, for example can be done anywhere.
4. If practising is done for the love of music making, so much the better. If an incentive is needed, try practising before the child's favorite TV program; playtime with a friend; milk and biscuits with a revered teddy bear; or perhaps best of all, story time with you.
5. Young children thrive in an atmosphere of gamesmanship.
 - a) Make charts for them to fill in, (ticking off an assigned task gives children a sense of accomplishment when repetition is involved).
 - b) Use a timer for young children who don't see an end in sight. Show them how quickly a minute (or 5 or 10) will pass by setting the timer and insisting that they stop when the timer goes off. Soon they'll be clamoring for more.

- c) With a bit of colored paper, scissors, paste and a tiny bit of ingenuity, fashion a tree with bare branches. Cut out lots of leaves with tasks and the number of repetitions written on each leaf. When completed, paste the leaf on a branch. When all the leaves are on the tree, have a special treat together... a trip to the zoo or restaurant or a favorite reserve. Obviously, this should take a week or longer to accomplish.
- d) Use a game board. After a specific number of repetitions, each of you can make in a move. (Don't plan to complete the game in one practice).
- e) After a particularly good practice that includes excellent behavior, ring grandparents and play for them. (My grandchildren ring from America for this purpose). Play for the other parent as a special treat.
- f) "Perform" on a mock stage (on a small rug, in a box, on the landing...)
- g) Dedicate a repetition to grandparents friends, relatives, dolls, Teddies.
- h) Play a song in each corner of the room; play it in every room in the house (when you are particularly energetic).
- i) List all tasks on separate pieces of paper or cardboard. Put them in a bowl, and have your child fish for them.
- j) Break up the practice with a snack. Set a timer so it is clear when the break is over.
- k) Arrange a Partner for Practice if another child lives nearby. You work with two children one day a week. The other child's Mother works with two children one day a week... or whatever you can manage. Children love to play together. Notice how you treat the other child. Apply the same modes of behavior to your own child!
- l) Finally, smile! Smile often. Have fun! Enjoy the moment. Hugs are always in order. At a certain point, your child will let you know by rolling his eyes or repeating "**Oh, MOTHER!**" Those certain games, once cherished, are no longer needed or desirable. This is a sign that your child is growing up and although she still needs your support and attention, she requires more subtlety on your part. Subtlety, after a hard day at work, may be the last thing on your mind. If you can muster it, it works.

THE OLDER CHILD

1. Make a list of review pieces which are to be practiced without your presence. When you join the practice, ask for one to be played so that the two of you can discuss it together and plan how to improve it either now or at the next practice.
2. Some things never get stale... such as smiles, hugs, and snack breaks when needed.
3. Continue to make it easier for your child to practice by having things ready ahead of time.
4. The practice is now longer, with many added tasks such as note reading, review, extra pieces, scales. Two practices in a day will ease the pressure. Even if it's only ten minutes, much can be accomplished *before school*. Irving or Gertrude can do review alone if you are too busy getting breakfast ready and lunches packed. Or work on an especially hard preview spot.

5. Plan the order of the practice together. Take a back seat when you can, but keep the lines of communication well oiled so that you can ask if he thinks he can do better, or remind him of a particular request of the teacher.
6. Stay cool when your Princess announces that you don't know what you are talking about, as you cannot play at all! Acknowledge the truth of this. Tell her that you are in awe that she can play so well, that it looks so difficult, but that you are only trying to help her remember what her teacher has asked her to do. Admire!
7. Continue with any strategy that your child still enjoys. Discontinue others. Your older child (let's say, 9-12) may prefer uninterrupted time alone as post-practice entertainment to spending time with you.

THE CONFIRMED TEENAGER

By now, if not earlier, your budding musician has taken control of much of his own practice. It has been a gradual process. His involvement is his own. Of course, you will have had some difficult moments along the route, when he (or you) have threatened to quit. But this too, will usually pass, particularly if she is now playing in her school ensemble or the youth symphony and through persistent well directed practice, has developed true skill on the instrument fostered by your early approach with love and humor. Well done, Mum and Dad! Your major contribution will continue to be, your support, your admiration, and your chauffeuring skills.

My parting advice is that no matter how responsible a teenager becomes, no matter how mature (s)he is, please do not imagine that (s)he is capable of putting the CD's on and remaining in the room where they are actually playing. This remains the parent's job until such time as (s)he leaves home or is at University, whichever comes first. Trust me.