

KIDS AND PRACTICING

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR PARENTS



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INTRODUCTION

It seems that I've been hearing the question "How can I get my child to practice?" more and more lately. To be honest, I've been hearing it ever since I began teaching music in 1982. Still, the number of times I hear it in a given year has definitely been on the increase.

I have my own opinions as to what lies behind this. First, life is certainly more hectic these days. Everyone's busier. Between increases in homework, sports participation, and other activities, kids are as maxed out as their parents. Many simply don't have as much free time as before, if any.

Second, the pressure to succeed and excel has trickled down to all of us. As a result, we expect more from kids nowadays; "we" meaning society in general, not necessarily you or me. The bar is set higher, and kids face more pressure than ever to devote their dwindling free time to achieving loftier goals in both schoolwork and sports.

Third, there are my personal pet peeves — television, video games, the Internet, IM-ing, iPod-ing — the greatest gobblers of free time and creative expression ever devised.

But I am not writing this guide to bemoan the state of society and culture in 21st century America. I want to address your concerns. I'll share with you what I've learned over the past quarter century about kids and practicing. It is my sincere hope that this information will help to bring the sound of music into your home on a more regular basis ... and further enrich the lives of your children as only playing music can.

QUICK TIPS FOR PARENTS

Here are some tips to assist you in giving your child the best support possible for his or her music study. As with any skill, persistence and enthusiasm count far more than talent. But the right support from you is an equally vital element in your child's success.

GETTING STARTED:

- ▶ Schedule a consistent daily time for practice.
- ▶ Provide a quiet place to practice.
- ▶ Remain nearby during practice time (except if your child is a teen).

DO's:

- ▶ Urge your child to make a minimum 1-year commitment to her lessons.
- ▶ Ask about each lesson, but don't pry.
- ▶ Offer compliments and encouragement often.

DON'T's:

- ▶ Don't insist that your child perform for others if she clearly doesn't want to.
- ▶ Never criticize less-than-perfect playing.
- ▶ Don't expect unrealistically rapid progress. Talk to her teacher about it.

IF YOUR CHILD LOSES INTEREST:

- ▶ Don't panic.
- ▶ Ask your child why she thinks her interest is waning.
- ▶ Ask her teacher what might be done to rekindle her enthusiasm.

Learning to play a musical instrument is not easy. But rewarding feelings of accomplishment are not won through the completion of "easy" endeavors. If you are willing to help your child through the difficulties inherent in music study, the rewards will be many.

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THEY NEED YOUR HELP

Before we begin, let me reassure you beyond any doubt that you are not alone! The struggle to get kids to practice is as old as the Gregorian chant ... and then some! In fact, it is the rare family with children taking music lessons that doesn't go through it.

Children generally do not have the capacity to be self-motivated to practice until they are both mature enough and accomplished enough for the music to take over. They lack the patience and commitment to work through the difficult beginning stages of music study. It takes an adult, with an adult's ability to see down the road, to help a child press on.

Only after they reach a certain level of music mastery will they will begin to acquire self-motivation. In short, they won't want to practice until they're older and more accomplished (when the music gets good and fun). The catch-22 is this: To reap maximum benefit, music study should be started at a young age, when the motivation must come from outside sources (i.e., you).

Even if they enjoy playing songs, they may still lack the patience to actually practice them (refine, repeat, revue, slow down, correct, try again, etc.) without your patient guidance.

Parents of teens: Do not sit in. At this stage in their development, your presence will be extremely counterproductive. Teens prefer to keep their music private. Your suggestions will be ignored and defied. At the very least, they will feel uncomfortable (even if they say otherwise) and little will be accomplished.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Until your child reaches adolescence, or at least has a few years' experience, be with her while she practices. Don't leave her to struggle alone. She needs your support, encouragement, focus, and long-range perception. Most children will not stick with music without a parent's help.

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BUT WHY GO TO THE TROUBLE?

Why should your child be encouraged to learn and practice a musical instrument? With all the other activities competing for her attention, is it really worth the trouble of getting her to practice?

Absolutely!

Music is communication. It's self-expression. It's art. It teaches about feelings and intuitive understanding. It can bring families closer together.

Playing music will make your child smart. Music is math. Children process more math and spatial-reasoning while playing a single song than their friends do in a week. Numerous studies show that children who study music average 36% higher math scores, 22% higher verbal scores, and 12% higher IQ scores.

Music keeps the brain hopping and is unmatched in requiring both hemispheres of the brain to function together. It is truly a whole-brain activity. In comparison, working with computers has been shown to provide a 0% increase in thinking scores. Kids learn through close interaction with people, as well as through tactile stimulation, of which computers offer neither.

Music study aids in the development of:

- ▶ self-discipline
- ▶ feelings of pride and accomplishment
- ▶ self-confidence
- ▶ eye-hand coordination
- ▶ creativity

Playing music offers a sense of achievement. It is a wonderful way to learn goal-setting and goal-attainment.

And playing music relieves stress.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Music will greatly enrich your child's life in many ways, musical and extra-musical. It is most assuredly worth the effort on your part!

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THERE MUST BE MUTUAL RESPECT

It's not about how "good" your child can get, nor what amount of innate talent she possesses. It's about what music will do for her. Your child will enjoy and benefit from music no matter how "musically inclined," or not, she may be.

Music will most likely not be her future career. And it's not a sport. Don't make it a competitive issue. Make it a rewarding one. The competitive attitude robs the joy and satisfaction right out of it. We don't need to be brilliant, or even very good, at an endeavor in order to enjoy and benefit from it. Even modest (but consistent) effort is all it takes.

What's more important — music, or your relationship with your child? Don't strain it by battling over practicing. Encourage, appreciate, and encourage some more. Then back off. A battle will never fix anything. Make her music a wholly positive experience or she will drop it in a second.

If your child's self-esteem hangs on being the best, instead of being competent, she will never win. Untamed competitive feelings stifle the real purpose of music-making: to express oneself. Relying on one's superiority for a feeling of self-worth creates a sort of pseudo-esteem, which, at best, is very fragile. True self-worth comes from a spirit of giving (i.e., sharing one's music).

Help to instill in your child a dedication to music, not being a star, the best, number one. Being number two or even eighty-eight is fine. Striving to be "the best" or "outstanding" usually involves being driven: chronically unsatisfied, narrowly focused. Is this what we want for our children?

Don't push your child to perform. Ask, "would you like to share that piece with us? I've enjoyed hearing it, and our guests may as well." Of course, if she says no, the answer is no. This is especially true with teens, who typically resent having to perform.

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THE NATURE OF PRACTICING vs. THE NATURE OF KIDS

Practicing is not a childlike activity. Musical talent may be innate, but discipline, perseverance, and long-term commitment are not. The process of playing a passage over and over is psychologically opposed to a child's nature. It's normal for them to enjoy playing music ... and at the same time not enjoy practicing it.

Sitting still for an extended period of time is difficult for children. So is sticking to a daily commitment. Practicing is a lonely activity. Children have neither the maturity nor the long-range vision to understand or appreciate the value of playing something over and over in order to master it. They can't see into the future — when the practicing will finally pay off.

Practicing is hard work. Playing music uses up to 90% of the brain's capacity at once — and it can involve up to thirty-seven mental processes at the same time! It is certainly rewarding, but at the same time it can be demanding and tiring. And, again, many of the rewards are too far down the road for the young child to perceive.

Don't be overly concerned that your child doesn't like to practice. Of course she doesn't — she's a kid! They need continual support and encouragement from you. You are the primary source of motivation to them. The instructor, who they see for only thirty minutes a week, is second. Those who receive continual support from their parents consistently make the most progress.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Rarely do children who practice alone become proficient enough to become self-motivated.

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CREATE A MUSICAL ENVIRONMENT AT HOME

Make music a part of your child's life — and not just with what's on the radio. Popular music is a product — a product whose content is dictated by executives in order to make money. Its success has nothing to do with artistic value, talent, or even quality. On occasion, expose your child to music written from passion, from the soul, and for which talent is not optional: jazz, classical, blues, folk, Broadway, etc. Trust me, even when children roll their eyes at such offerings, they know intuitively when music is art and when it's product — when it's real and when it's not. Great music inspires like nothing else can.

Limit your child's television viewing (now approaching 45 hours per week on average). Dire Straits' guitarist, Mark Knoffler, has referred to television as the single biggest time-wasting deterrent to the fulfillment of endeavors ever created."

Take in live music whenever you have the chance. School shows, free concerts, musicals, swing bands, anything. The quality of the performance is less important than your child's exposure to music that is real, music that is right in front of her, music that has not been edited to unnatural perfection as have most recordings.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The world of music is unimaginably vast. It spans styles, cultures, continents, and centuries. Help your child hear what's out there beyond day-to-day commercial offerings. Exposing your child to — and encouraging an appreciation of — many musical styles is one of the single biggest things you can do toward helping your child become the best musician she can be!

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FAVORABLE PRACTICE CONDITIONS

1. Get the best instrument you can afford, but keep in mind that price is not necessarily an indicator of quality.
2. Provide your child as undisturbed a place to practice as you can — away from the TV. Practicing demands total concentration. Little will be accomplished if there is a TV blaring nearby.
3. Sit down with your child and select a regular daily practice time. Call it “practice time”; make it official. Make it their time; no interruptions, no chores, etc. Stick to it. If practicing is left to be done whenever the child “feels like it,” it won’t happen.
4. See to it that your child isn’t deluged with too many conflicting interests. Simplify her life. Say no to less important activities.

How long should she practice? For ages 4 - 5, try five 10-minute sessions per week. Ages 6 - 9: five 20-minute sessions per week. Anyone older, three hours per week. Less than three hours per week = dabbling. This has merit, but children who consistently operate at this level often quit by adolescence because they won’t be competent enough to sustain their interest.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Any practice is better than none at all ... as long as it is genuine practice and not simply “running tunes” from start to finish.

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QUALITY PRACTICE: THE KEY TO SUCCESS

1. Be with your child when she practices — particularly in the early stages.
2. Long-range goals don't work with younger children. Establish short easily-accomplished goals. Have her play four difficult phrases five times each, then the entire piece twice. Or, ten minutes fixing the toughest page. Or, review and polish an already learned piece for five minutes each day. Setting specific daily goals eliminates guesswork.
3. Whatever the goal may be, write it down. This will give it more weight and authority.
4. Children need to be reminded to systematically work on short sections (separate bars, separate phrases, separate lines). Otherwise, they will simply play through the song nonstop ... and end up with virtually no net improvement for their effort.
5. Remind them to play it right — very slowly — then work on speed later. This will help them to avoid "printing" a mistake-ridden version into their memory. Encourage an accurate run through right from the start — no matter how slowly. Children naturally rush, so they need you to remind them to "take it slow."
6. Once they can play a passage correctly, have her repeat it enough times so as to "erase" the incorrect version.

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PRACTICING WITH YOUR CHILD

Contact with a teacher once a week is not enough to sustain a young child's interest, nor will it ensure that she is practicing correctly. An adult should be present during practice time to offer support, to encourage, and to help maintain focus.

Children can sometimes manage on their own, but progress will be slower and motivation will decrease.

Here are some guidelines for practicing with your child:

1. Be enthusiastic. Don't nag or make demands. No matter how "off" the music may sound to you, remain upbeat at all times.
2. Be positive. Find good things to say — but don't overdo it. By the same token, don't just sit there like a practice policeman and point out mistakes and lapses in attention either.
3. Be sympathetic. Offer pats on the back. If your child complains that something is too hard, say, "Yes, that does look challenging. Let's try it once more!" Or: "In this house, we don't give up."
4. Maintain your self-control. Take an alleged bathroom break if you need to leave the room and regain control. Anger or negativity will all but destroy your child's willingness to continue.
5. Use incentives. Money, M&Ms, skipping a chore. More on this later.
6. Stay on the same team. Never mind winning the present battle (power struggle). Win the war — that she will love playing music for life. Anger or negativity certainly won't help bring that about.
7. Downplay their complaints. Griping is normal during a child's practice sessions. Don't let it get to you. Say, "Oh, come on! You'll get there!" very light-heartedly.

8. Use tension dissolvers. If they refuse to practice, don't automatically assume that all is lost. Threaten a younger child with ten seconds of tickling! Then start fresh tomorrow.
9. Be sensitive to their bad days and lighten up on them. On these days, allow them to just play through some old favorites (theirs or yours) if that's all they're willing to do. It's far better than nothing.
10. Expect a bad day once in a while. Sometimes music that was fine yesterday will be a disaster today. Remind your child often that this is life for musicians, young and old.
11. Enjoy their music. Listen in while paying bills, knitting, etc. Hum her music to yourself on occasion (but loudly enough that she can hear you). Enjoy your child's music even if it's not of a style you favor.
12. Remind them that they are making progress. Remind them often. Children generally can't perceive their long-term gradual improvement.

You most likely can't sit in on every single session. Nonetheless, any supervision is far better than none. Do the best you can!



WHEN THEY DON'T WANT TO PRACTICE

Nagging (i.e., reminding them more than once a day) doesn't work. Neither does arguing. (You made your request; no further explanation is necessary.) Simply restate their agreed-upon practice schedule and let them have the last word if necessary.

Don't make threats. This challenges a child. Often, his pride will demand that he take a confrontational stance and defy you.

Don't give in. Don't pay too much credence to a child's whims about not wanting to practice. The middle-school age is the most challenging: Growing into adolescence leaves a body more tired more often, and one's social calendars more filled. Cut some slack, but don't give in.

When a child tells you that she doesn't want to continue her music study, she almost never really means it. Everyone gets irrational from time to time and says things they don't mean. Even one or two very challenging pieces can bring this about. Talk to her instructor. Some easier pieces can always be substituted for a while.

IMPORTANT: If her insistence that she doesn't want to continue seems more serious and ongoing, consider having her try a new style, a new approach, a new direction with her music. Talk to her instructor. Do everything you can before allowing her to throw her months or years of effort (and your money) out the window. You'll save the two of you a whole future of regret.

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IT'S OKAY TO GIVE REWARDS

Music alone won't motivate a child to practice for quite some time. Until the music becomes compelling enough by itself, rewards can be a great help.

Contrary to popular opinion, offering a reward is not bribery. Bribes are given beforehand. Rewards have to be earned. Practicing is hard work and children know full well that our economic system is based on being paid for our efforts.

Furthermore, a reward system beats the alternatives: nagging, screaming, threats, quitting. Incentives need only be temporary until inertia and more engrossing, compelling music takes over. After that, they can be used during those times when your child finds herself on a plateau (once every couple of years) and needs an extra push.

Formalize a reward system and write it down. Here are some examples:

- ▶ One month of consistent practice = an iTunes gift card.
- ▶ A new blouse upon the completion of a difficult piece.
- ▶ Skating. A sleepover. A new CD.
- ▶ One week of practice = exemption from a chore.
- ▶ 10 M&Ms for ten minutes of practice.

Be creative. You, better than anyone, know what would best motivate your child. Experiment and find a system that works.

CLOSING REMARKS

Obviously, this guide contains far too many ideas and suggestions for any one family to follow, let alone remember.

My hope is that two or three points will speak to your situation the best, that you can put these into practice for now, and leave the rest on the back burner for possible use later.

A re-read, with highlighter in hand, is always a good idea.

Just do your best and expect nothing more from yourself. Any improvement in getting your child to practice and stick with their music, no matter how small, is far better than none. Don't forget how important music can be in your child's life. In the end, sticking with it matters more than any substantial increase in practice time.

It's not about the music. It's about them and the enrichment they stand to gain from it.

Your joy is simply to encourage, encourage, encourage. Make it clear to your child that you believe in her, that you are behind her all the way, and that you will never give up on her. This strategy offers no guarantees, but it is by far the best bet going.

Best of luck to you and your child. May her lifetime contain many an opportunity to add some music to the world.

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