

# *Parents thinking a child can practice alone is the main reason children stop piano study.*

## How to Help Your Child Practice at Home

### **What Practice Is**

Knowing what practice is and why it's valuable will assist you in helping your child make the most of her time at the instrument. It will also guide you in dealing with the resistance that will happen on occasion, even with the most dedicated child.

Your child will be very frustrated with her inability to carry out the lesson assignment at home the longer she waits between practice sessions because she has forgotten what to do and how to do it. Therefore, daily practice will give your child the most progress for her effort and will keep frustration to a minimum.

Practicing seven days a week is not realistic for every student or every family, however, the student might like "a day off." If she practices six days a week, her tasks will be well-reinforced and one 48-hour gap will not affect her overall retention significantly. The day after or before the lesson is never a good choice for the vacation day.

Home practice is also a time to experiment. After she completes her assignment, encourage your child to explore. Perhaps she can pick out a tune by ear, play a song she already knows but in a different way, or make up her own song. Playing an old song or two is fun; this is also a good way to reinforce your child's progress and point out that her efforts are bearing fruit: "Do you remember back at Christmas when this song was so hard for you?" Looking ahead in her materials is another productive activity: your child can see how much of the upcoming material she already knows and can challenge herself to figure out some of the rest.

Finally, home practice is a time for the family to participate in the child's music study. This can take the form of "family concerts" after dinner, playing duets with another family member, or participating in the games the teacher assigns (to work on note-reading or counting).

### **The Secret Weapon**

*Important: The main reason children want to quit piano is that the parent assumes the child can carry out the assignment by herself. She can't.*

***Parents' thinking the child can practice alone is the main reason children stop piano study.***

Frustration, confusion, and despair set in when the child can't carry out the task by herself.

And then the parent is upset ("Is my child unable to play the piano? Is she unmusical?") and wonders whether the money and effort being expended is worth it.

**Don't expect the child to practice on her own!**

Of course, parents don't deliberately leave the child alone at the piano. It's just something they've never thought to avoid. Now you know the secret!

So, be directly involved. On the bench if the child is young. In the room when the child is older.

Note: Learning HOW to PRACTICE is a different skill altogether from actually playing the instrument.

The secret weapon is YOU and your direct involvement in your child's home practice!

## **Help with the Lesson Assignment**

Your child's teacher will let you know exactly what you need to do to assist actively in home practice. The teacher may ask you to watch the student's hand position as she plays to make sure she maintains the correct one or she may ask you to count out loud for your child. A youngster may have card games or board games or other fun activities to carry out at home with a partner.

With young children, you may have to be involved directly for the entire practice session at first. Even after a long period of study, your help may be needed for most of the practice time. Do not expect your child to carry out her practice entirely by herself until she is about 10 years old. (Yes, piano study is a significant commitment for the family!) With children under that age, plan to sit in the room with the child, even if you are not on the bench with her.

Many children (up through approximately 6th grade) like to have a parent keep them company while they practice. Even if the child doesn't need your

sustained participation, she may crave your presence because she's lonely in the piano room all by herself. Don't imply by words or body language that you'd rather be somewhere else. That attitude is a negative. Use your "keeping company time" to read for pleasure, catch up on professional reading, balance the checkbook, or simply relax and enjoy your child's accomplishments.

At some point, your child will inform you that you are no longer needed. Usually this is about 7th grade. Ask if your daughter would like you to sit in the room while she practices. Even if she answers yes initially, soon she will inform you that she'd rather be by herself. This change is almost instantaneous when the child enters junior high.

## **Divide Practice Time**

With today's busy families, it often works well to divide practice session into two or more segments, particularly with a young child who is still developing her attention span. Two 15-minute practices--or even three 10-minute sessions--can be more productive than one 30-minute sitting. Divide the material for variety, too. For example, if there are two songs, two games, and a technique exercise, work at one song the first time and the other song at the second practice time, playing a game each session and working on half the technical material.

## **At Home Immediately After the Lessons**

If students (adults as well as children) did the following after each lesson, they would find their progress accelerate rapidly.

After you return home, sit down with your child and play through the lesson assignment *one time*. This should consume 10 minutes at most. For each part of the assignment, ask your child to describe what she is supposed to do and why and then have her play it for you. This will acquaint you with what you should be hearing and how you should be hearing it, and your child will know that you are aware of precisely what the teacher has requested. Should there be questions, call the teacher right away for clarification rather than let the child ignore an element of his assignment all week (or worse: do it incorrectly and later have to un-learn!).

Your child reaps several things from this post-lesson review. It is a tangible reminder that you support her efforts and are vitally interested in the content of what she is doing. The most important benefit is that the immediate repetition of the assigned material ensures almost 100% retention of what the teacher said at the lesson.

If you like, count this session as a day's practice, so your child may have "a day off" another time later in the week.

**But remember: you need to be directly involved on the bench with your child.**

## A Consistent Practice Time

Most students benefit from a consistent piano practice time. Adults find a routine helps them shoehorn in all they must do; children draw security from routine.

Schoolwork is first priority. If there is a large assignment that evening, there may be no time for practice because schoolwork is most important. After schoolwork comes piano playing, however. When that is complete, then there's time to play outside, talk on the telephone, watch TV, or whatever else they'd like to do. It's important that children know that *piano study falls right after schoolwork in the day's hierarchy*. If there are daily household chores the child is expected to take care of, these come third. They should understand that some days their homework load and their piano time may preclude most or all of their playtime. Not every day, surely, but sometimes. They should understand and accept this before study begins so they can't plead ignorance when faced with a situation like this.

Of course, children may "unwind" by having a snack or changing clothes, but right after that, it's time to hit the books. No getting sidetracked with a magazine or playing with a friend or watching an afternoon TV show.

## At-Home Quiet Zone

It goes without saying that other family members should not be in the piano room during practice time. Nor should they be causing a racket elsewhere in the house. Not only is the noise itself distracting, but your child's curiosity will be piqued by the possibility that something interesting is going on elsewhere and she will be distracted and restless. Most families find that practice time for one child is a perfect homework time (or story time) for another.

## Reminders

Sometimes, you may have to remind your child to practice. Occasionally, you'll have to remind more firmly!

No matter her level of interest in music study, your child is only human and some days she will want to do something else before piano. Or, skip practice altogether. Take a deep breath. Ask the child to play an old song. Applaud her effort! Take another deep breath, hug your child, and say how proud you are! If

things go completely downhill, ask your child just to play some favorite songs for you. Don't worry about her assignment. This keeps her at the piano (for enjoyment!), and gives you relaxation and rejuvenation!

A regular practice time and at-home quiet zone helps, as does an obvious interest and commitment from the parent(s), as noted. **Remember that young children can't be expected to practice on their own or even remember it's time to do their piano-playing.** Some even forget whether they've done it or not!

If you constantly experience trouble inducing your child to practice (tantrums, tears, shouting), something is wrong. Your child may not have thought out the time and effort necessary for learning to play a musical instrument. Or, she may have changed her mind when she discovered it's not like TV: with piano study she is a participant; with TV she is only a spectator. Another possibility is that she has some other problem which is preventing her from feeling her effort is producing a worthwhile result (a sibling is being a pest during practice time, the other parent is making disparaging remarks about piano study, etc.). Consult the teacher for advice.

## **Dealing with Rebellion about Piano Playing Time**

Short answer: Stay the course!

Sometimes it will be difficult, and you'll feel like throwing in the towel. (Enough! The hassle isn't worth it! Go ahead and quit!!) Don't. You're doing the right thing, and your child will thank you forever for providing the instrument, the opportunity to study, and your resolve to teach them responsibility when they want to quit something that isn't easy. Piano study isn't easy. If it were, everyone would be doing it.

**I have never heard an adult say her mom let her quit piano and was glad that she did! EVERY one of them says she is sorry she quit.**

Your children will thank you, so stay the course when things get rocky. And they will. Remember you're giving your child a gift that can't be taken away and one that will bring a lifetime of joy...even when it seems the direct opposite is true while you're in the process!

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Unless your child is naturally gifted, mastering a musical instrument, sport, or other skill is going to be difficult unless she makes a commitment to practice. But getting her to do that may be one of the biggest power struggles you face as a parent.

Helping your child appreciate the rewards of practicing is essential because it also teaches them an important life lesson: it teaches kids about commitment, follow-through, and responsibility. It's not about practicing a particular thing; it's about teaching kids that making an effort will make you better at something.

Unlike team sports training, practicing an instrument is typically a solitary experience that requires self-discipline. And the repetition needed to perfect the skill can be downright boring to some. Not to mention the time factor: kids juggle so many activities that they don't want to spend their precious downtime on something they perceive to be more work. Fortunately, there are ways to motivate your children to practice, and even learn to view it as a fun activity. Try these strategies: **Pick something your child truly enjoys.** Sometimes parents push kids into learning a musical instrument because they believe a musical education is important. Or they encourage their children to pursue a sport because they themselves once excelled at it — or wanted to. A better choice: Take your lead from your children, says Robert Dicker, M.D., a child psychiatrist in Glen Oaks, New York. When Radigan's son Dylan picked up the guitar, she says, "I saw a clear distinction between what he had a passion for and what he had an obligation to do." **Set up a routine.** Schedule a time that doesn't follow a less enjoyable task like homework, suggests Dicker, but comes before a fun activity like playing with friends. That way your child has something to look forward to when he's finished. **Remove the ticking clock.** It's not how long your child practices but the quality of her effort that counts. Work on sections rather than a whole song. Use a log to record what she is practicing and the specific goals she wants to achieve. **Make practicing fun.** Instead of saying, "Let's go practice" say, "let's go play." Make the activity enjoyable for your child. Encourage him to stand on one foot or do scales with one eye closed. Play "beat the clock" activities when appropriate. Have her tape record herself, or arrange for a group practice session with her friends. Brainstorm with your child to come up with ways to make practicing more fun. **Choose the right teacher.** Chemistry matters. Make sure the teacher working with your child is a good fit. If the instructor isn't inspiring, you'll be in for even more foot-dragging. **Choose rewards carefully.** The last thing you want to do is send the message that your child is practicing simply because she'll get something in return. To prevent that, choose rewards that complement the activity, whether it's a snazzy new pair of soccer cleats or a special necklace for her recital. Ultimately, your child will realize that mastering this skill is the best reward of all.

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## **Motivating Kids to Practice**

March 1, 2010

In teaching young children, the fight to practice everyday often leads parents to feel that the struggle is not worth the results. Even if a child likes their lessons, it can be discouraging to parents to have their child complain and make practicing a chore. While no one likes to practice (OK, there may be a few quirky kids out there who really enjoy their practice time), but most children do not like it, and are not able to

understand that doing something they don't like will be beneficial in the long run. Here is where some creativity can really help!

Making practicing fun, or at least tolerable is our goal. In doing this though we cannot compromise learning. The following are a compilation of ideas I came up with myself, age old motivators, and some things I have adapted from others to help parents of young children make practicing less of a chore and more of a bonding time.

1. The old **Rewards Chart** or **Sticker Chart**. This idea has been used for decades by parents to help motivate their child to do everything from cleaning their room, to taking a bath. The good thing about this method is that the child can see their progress, be physically involved with checking off duties or picking stickers for a job well done, and they are working toward an achievable, tangible goal. This method can also be adapted for each individual child and can be changed as the child progresses and gets older.
2. Another motivator for young children is for the parents to **take lessons along with the child**. This may sound funny, but think about it, a child usually wants to do what they see their parents doing. What better way to create a desire to practice than if they see Mommy or Daddy practicing. They can't join in unless they practice too, and because young children often progress faster than adults, children will love it when they can do something better than Mom or Dad! This is also a good way for Mom and Dad to better understand the difficulties a child might be having with one aspect of their technique, and can aid parents in helping their children learn an instrument they have no experience playing.
3. Another great idea, which I can't take credit for but is a wonderful creative idea, is something I'm going to coin **Story Book Practicing**. This idea focuses around the fact that kids have active imaginations and often get bored with the monotonous repetition of practicing. The Story Book Practicing method involves the parent making up a story that revolves around them completing the tasks their teacher has assigned for the week during their daily practice time. As you progress in the practice time and complete the tasks at hand correctly you continue in the story. The story can be shaped and molded to fit whatever is needed to be accomplished that day. Here is an example.

Parent: "Oh no!"

Child: "What's wrong?"

Parent: "Monsters have just kidnapped the fairy princess, and somebody has to go save her!"

Child: "I'll save her!"

Parent: "Okay, they took her into a dark cave. You're not afraid of the dark, right?"

Child: "No way! What do I have to do?"

Parent: "There's water in the cave, but fortunately there's a rowboat. To row the boat, you need to play the first four measures of Twinkle. If you can do it three times with a perfect bow hand that will get us to the end of the cave and we can see where to go next."

Child: "Okay"

Parent: "Get into a good play position, here we go!"

If the child forgets to play with a good bow hand the parent could tell the child that they lost an oar, or that the boat tipped over and floated backward, or that they ran into a rock, etc. You can change the story line daily, or you can make it into an ongoing saga so the child can't wait to

practice to they find out what happens next. You can make stories that go along with the music they are playing to help the child get in the character of what they are playing. There are an endless variety of ways this method can be used, and when I came across it I thought it was just brilliant!

4. **Let your child have a say.** For me, taking an instrument wasn't an option, but I was allowed to choose the instrument I played. Perhaps it has always been your dream to play the flute, but your child might not have any interest in this. If you try to live your dreams through your child you are most likely going to be met with resistance. Instead, ask your child what instrument they would like to play. If they pick they will be more likely to feel a connection with what they are doing and will eventually embrace it as their own.

Also let your child have a say in when they practice. Do they prefer to practice right after school, or maybe they need a break but want to do it before dinner. Maybe after dinner is the best time, or perhaps they want to practice before school. Allow your child to have as much say in when they do their practicing as possible. This will allow them to take responsibility for their choice.

Let your child pick the order they practice things in. Just because their teacher goes in the same order every week at lessons doesn't mean you have to. As long as you get through everything that's what matters. If you can give your child a list of what needs to be practiced and allow them to choose the order this will give them an additional sense of personal connection to their practicing and instrument.

This is not an exhausted list of what you can allow your child to have a say in. Getting their input as much as possible and having open communication about things is key. This also teaches them to grow and start taking responsibility for making decisions that affect them, which is all part of the learning process!

5. **Get involved!** If your child only goes to their lessons and then practices at home they may not be having fun. Perhaps they would enjoy things more if they could be with other kids. Maybe you could ask your teacher about opportunities for them to take some group lessons in addition to their private lessons. Also getting them to participate in recitals or having them play for relatives or friends can be a motivator too. If a child likes to show off this can be a great way to get them to practice. If your child doesn't like to get up in front of people don't force them to. Perhaps they would enjoy performing in an orchestra more. I always loved this aspect of my instrument and always think it's great for kids to play with others their own age. They get to be motivated by others that are better than they are, and they also feel good when they see that they are better than others in the group. Also getting your kids out to see other performers give recitals, or attending special events designed just for kids where their instrument is showcased can be a very positive experience for your child. Seeing what they can do with their instrument gives them a vision beyond the mundane four walls of your house or the teacher's studio. There are a variety of ways for kids to have more involvement depending on your location and community. Ask your teacher about some possibilities if you don't know where to start. Teachers are always more than happy to share ways to enrich the musical lives of their students!
6. **Break up practice time.** While a child's lesson needs to happen all in one block of time, daily practicing does not. If your child has a short attention span do two or three shorter practice sessions a day. You will get the same amount of material accomplished without burning your child out. As your child gains the ability to focus for longer periods of time, up their practice time a few minutes each session. Eventually you will be able to eliminate practice sessions and ultimately go back to one practice section without all the stress!
7. While setting an amount of time to practice is good, **it's the quality of practice that counts.** If children think they can whine and make your life difficult for 30 minutes a day and that's "practice time" they need to be informed otherwise. Practicing means work. Your expectations of what practicing means needs to be clear so that children know what is expected of them. If 30 minutes go by and they haven't picked up their instrument and done anything productive they may



- need to try again later. However, let the child know that if they do what they are being asked and cooperate they might be able to be done before 30 minutes is over and have extra time to play, read a book or watch TV. Make the quality of practice time, not the amount of practice time what matters. This is a reward system within itself that is actually teaching your child a very important life skill, there is only a finite amount of time and we need to use it wisely. Bringing this principle down to their level and giving them a tangible example of a responsibility they have and the rewards of doing it well will benefit both you and them.
8. **Include your child in critiquing their practice time.** Think of yourself as more of a facilitator for your child's practice time. Instead of correcting your child all the time, ask your child what they think can be improved. Ask them what they think could have been better and ask them about ways to help them improve this aspect of their playing. Be sure to also ask them what they did well too. Having them critique themselves is a lot less "painful" than having you critique them all the time, and they are gaining an important skill for when they are older and will be practicing by themselves. Also ask them to remember from day to day what their teacher said to work on for each thing before you practice it. This helps them remember to actually try to do it the first time they go to play it, rather than always having to correct them after they forget to do whatever they were working on. I try to do this when I teach as well. It's a great tool, and works to engage the child in what they are doing.
  9. While we're talking about criticizing let's talk about a better way to criticize than saying "you didn't do this right". **Try making criticisms less personal by criticizing the specific body part that is not behaving.** By saying "your thumb isn't behaving properly" or "we need to make sure that Mr. Pointer finger goes down in the right spot" you allow the child to feel that they have control over the different parts of their body and that they just have to make the body part do what they want it to do. This doesn't make them feel like they are doing something wrong, but rather makes them feel empowered to fix "someone else" who's doing something wrong. You can help your child have more fun and to work together with you to fix Mr. Pointer by saying something like, "Are you going to let Mr. Pointer get away with going down where he's not suppose to? Let's see if we can get Mr. Pointer to behave!" Your child will have much more fun with this approach and will become more in tune with how to use and control his muscles as well.
  10. **Praise your child!** Last on this list, but certainly not least is to make sure you motivate your child with praise and affirmation. Try to get extra excited about the little things that they do well, and minimize the criticisms you give. If your child knows you are just going to be negative all the time they are not going to be motivated to practice, but if you are positive and energized by the good job they do, they will want to work to please you.

Good luck, and happy practicing!

<http://blog.playviolinmusic.com/2010/03/01/motivating-kids-to-practice/>

## **Motivating Kids to Practice Suzuki**

### **Opening**

My husband, [Brian](#), and I have a child in [Suzuki](#) violin. We have a quirky way of practicing, and our violin teacher keeps telling us that we should tell other parents about it, because it really does work. So this blog post has nothing to do with technology (although it does have to do with lifehacking). It's aimed at other Suzuki parents, so if you're one of my normal blog readers and you have zero interest in music or motivating children, then move along. I'll be back to my normally-scheduled tech blogging next week.

### Suzuki is hard work



Learning an instrument is a life-long endeavor. It requires daily practice over a long period of time. If you're like my husband and me, you've made the decision that it's worth it. Our little one (I call her the geekling) is seven. She started Suzuki violin at the age of five, and she can't remember a time when she didn't practice every day. That's hard work! However, our job as a parents isn't to help her (or bribe or intimidate her to) struggle through the hard work. I'm going to tell you about the way we practice. It's a lot of work for us. The difference is that we know we're working hard. If all goes as planned, she thinks it's playtime.

### Trust your teacher

There's a reason we hire teachers. Any violinist could tell a child the 1,001 things that they are doing wrong. Edmund Sprunger says in his great book, [Helping Parents Practice](#), that his job as a violin teacher is to tell the child the one thing that will help them the most. A good violin teacher (ours is the fabulous [Christine Dunaway](#)) will tell you exactly what to practice at home. We, as parents, have a strong urge to correct our children. It's hard to watch them practicing bad habits, but if the focus for the week is a good bow hand, let the other stuff slide. There are a lot of things to think about while playing an instrument, and trying to focus on them all at once will overwhelm you and your child. Your job as a parent is to practice what you're told to practice. It's a no-brainer.

### Teach your child's body



Suzuki is about repetition. It's about muscles and neurons. Your child wants to be a great musician, and they want to perfectly execute everything you ask them to do. Telling your child "you're just not trying, try harder" is incredibly demotivating. You and your child have the same goals, you just need to help her whip her body and her brain into shape. Try using body and brain terminology with your child. Saying "you're having trouble with that fast spot in Allegro" is really different from saying "your fingers are having trouble with that fast spot in Allegro". The latter is both more accurate and more productive. The problem isn't that the geekling always forgets the c-sharp, the problem is that we need to work together on strengthening that neural pathway, because it sure is stubborn! Get it?

### Motivation



Just like adults, children need a good *reason* to follow directions. I think we all know that "because I said so" isn't a good reason. We quickly learn that our children think "because it will make you a great musician someday" isn't a good reason. There is a very important difference between

adults and children here. Adults want the real reason. Children want *a reason*. **This is the really important really hard work you need to do:** making stuff up. Here's an excerpt from a recent practice I did with the geekling:

"oh no!"

"what's wrong?"

"gremlins have just kidnapped the willow princess, and somebody has to go save her!"

"I'll save her!"

"okay, they took her into a dark cave. you're not afraid of the dark, right?"

"no way! what do I have to do?"

"there's water in the cave, but fortunately there's a rowboat. To row the boat, you need to play the first four measures of Perpetual Motion three times with a perfect bow hand, then we'll get to see what's at the end of the cave."

"okay"

"get into a good play position, here we go!"

You get the idea. If she forgets about her bow hand, then we've lost an oar and we need to go back to the mouth of the cave and start over. We've done dinosaur hunts and rock concerts and even saved the world from global warming. Take whatever excites your child this week, and roll with it. If I'm having a lousy day, and not feeling particularly creative, we'll use a book or a myth (The Ramayana works great) so I don't have to make up the structure. The teacher tells us what to practice, the story provides the motivation, and all I have to do is put the two together.



It's a totally flexible method too. If she's doing great, or it's taking longer than I expected, then a gryphon swoops in and flies us to the end of the cave. If I feel like a little more practice is necessary, then there's a gnome at the end of the cave who needs us to row him to his brother's place so we can all get scuba suits because the kidnappers went underwater. We also throw in a liberal dash of Choose Your Own Adventure, giving her two (or more) productive choices to turn the story in a certain direction. We always end the lesson on an incredible victory, and she's happy to practice the next day.



Our child is particularly kinesthetic, so we also include activities like "you've been sprinkled with fairy dust. put down your violin and touch every doorknob in the house so the fairies can come in." We'll toss a coin to decide what to do, or have her collect 8 pencils by playing something eight times, but then actually let her get a pencil out of the drawer each time she plays it. If she's extremely wiggly, we've even been known to have her run around the block in the middle of a lesson then come back and play.

Some people (like my husband) can do this sort of storytelling on the fly. I usually need some prep time to look over my lesson notes and form a story outline beforehand. Do what works for you.

### **In closing**

I hope that helps. All my work is public domain, so feel free to share this with friends, copy it, publish it,

whatever. I won't sue you. I would appreciate if you keep my name attached and let me know if you liked it and where you're passing it on. Good luck with practice!

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This piece was written by Seattle tech-writer Sarah Davies, and it is available on her blog, <http://sarahdavies.cc> at <http://sarahdavies.cc/2009/05/10/motivating-kids-to-practice-suzuki/>.

<http://sarahdavies.cc/suzuki.html>