

The Million Dollar Lesson

By Ed Kreitman

The million dollar lesson is designed to help young students learn what is and is not appropriate lesson behaviour. In my experience teaching, I have found that most young children eventually decide to "test the water" of lesson behaviour to see exactly what they can get away with. When this happens, the parent and teacher have the opportunity to teach the child that it is alright to manipulate the lesson, wasting everyone's valuable time, and the parent's money, or we can teach the child that inappropriate lesson behaviour is unacceptable.

First let's define inappropriate lesson behaviour. Hiding under a desk, in the corner or under the piano is inappropriate lesson behaviour. Clinging to mother's skirt with a thumb stuck in the mouth is inappropriate lesson behaviour. Acting bratty, and refusing to cooperate with the teacher is inappropriate lesson behaviour. Having an all out temper tantrum in the middle of the studio because you don't want to play *Lightly Row* is inappropriate lesson behaviour.

If we allow this type of activity to go on in our studios, the child will learn that he or she is able to control the lesson. I have had several who whined for 25 minutes until the next student showed up, then threw a temper tantrum because it was time to go and they couldn't have a lesson. This type of thing never happens in my studio anymore. Years ago, I learned from my mentor, Jeanne Luedke, that we need to address this situation even before it happens. With every new parent that enters my studio, part of the parent education is to discuss exactly how we will handle any situation dealing with appropriate lesson behaviour. Our goal is to train the child quickly and easily to have a productive lesson. I tell the parent that eventually, the child will come to the lesson and be tired, or fussy, or just decide that today is the day to test the perimeters of my patience, and pull something that is inappropriate. When that happens, the parent and I have a plan. First the parent is asked to take the child outside of the studio and have a talk. See if perhaps they need a drink, bathroom break, or whatever, to try to get it together. If this does not work, we agree that the parent will remove the child from the studio immediately, with no discussion. I usually say something like, "looks like today is the day" with a smile. The effectiveness of this lesson is lost if there is discussion or delay. The child needs to experience that hiding under the desk this minute produces the result of being in the car on the way home the next minute. The important part about having this plan set up in advance with the parent is that there is no anger on the part of the teacher, and no embarrassment on the part of the parent. We are simply going through the motions together of a necessary routine which will bring about a very positive change in the child's behaviour.

I would say that almost every child I have taught has had the million dollar lesson once. A few have had it twice, and if a child needs to have it a third time. I usually suggest to the parent that the child is not quite ready for formal instruction, and perhaps a break period of 3 to 6 months might be advised.

Incidentally, I call this the million dollar lesson, because one time as the mother was taking her screaming child out the door, she asked over her shoulder if there would be a makeup, or a refund for the lesson. Without thinking, I replied, "Oh no, you are definitely getting your money's worth this week. This is the MILLION DOLLAR LESSON."

And you know what? That girl played Bruch Violin Concerto on the solo recital last Sunday.