

## **Building a Home Practice Routine.**

**By Sarah Broughton Stalbow.**

Regular home practice is essential in order to make progress when learning a musical instrument. Imagine if instead of going to school five days a week, a child had a 30 minute weekly lesson on how to read and write, and no follow up in between these weekly lessons... It would take them years to be able to read and write fluently! However, many people do not make this connection with becoming a skilful and fluent musician; or maybe they do, but life just gets in the way of practice. If learning music is regarded as an optional extra activity, it is less likely to be prioritised and regular practice is neglected.

Music practice is well worth prioritising, as much research has shown. In the process of developing musical skills, children learn about persistence, goal setting, concentration and focus, team work, responsibility, creativity, emotional awareness, motor skills, aural skills, teamwork, and probably a hundred other things. A pattern of regular, positive music practise can also help develop a growth mindset and resilience in children.

### **The triangle**

Learning an instrument is really a three way partnership between the child, teacher and parent. It is common for busy parents to tell their child to "do their practice", expecting them to do it on their own, and to do it effectively. It is often a challenge for parents to take the time to sit with their child, listen to them, encourage them, teach them *how* to practice and become good at something. However it is important to remember that the weekly music lesson is very short, and only part of the learning program. Without practice, children make limited progress, or very slow progress, and parents may wonder why. Or sadly, they may decide their child just isn't "talented". Some parents may even blame the teacher for the child's lack of progress!

No one is born knowing *how* to practice, and many university music students still struggle with practising economically and effectively. Practising is a skill that needs to be learned, and it is part of the parent's role, as well as the teacher's, to help the child learn this skill. Just as school teachers wouldn't expect a five year old to read a home reader book by themselves every night to practice reading, it is unrealistic to expect a child to just "know" how to practice an instrument, and to do it by themselves. This is why early years school teachers provide detailed guidelines for home reading. By practising music with the child, parents' are teaching children skills to succeed in many aspects of life. The Suzuki concept of a triangle is a great way to depict the tri-partite relationship between parent, child and teacher.

A note for teachers: do you effectively communicate your expectations with regard to practice with parents? Do you offer suggestions about how to approach practice sessions? Perhaps teachers could forward parents a copy of this article!

## **Practice fundamentals**

For parents to begin a music practice routine with young children, I suggest four fundamental commitments:

1. Start small - maybe only 2 minutes at first.
2. Schedule and commit - find a time to schedule practise, and commit to doing it *every* day.
3. End on a happy note - always leave practice sessions on a happy note. If you see the child is struggling to concentrate or is unhappy, avoid pushing sessions on for too long just to get through all of the repertoire set for the week. Leaving things on a happy note means the child will be happy to come back and practice at a later time or the next day.
4. Take a long term view and value the process - over time, learning an instrument develops skills such as focus, persistence, and “grit”. It is also an opportunity for parents and children to spend quality time together: working together, showing interest in and support for the child’s achievements, irrespective of how big or small they are.

In addition, for maximum success the parent has to really engage and be present with the child. That means no phones (unless occasionally, the parent is videoing the child in order to analyse an aspect of their playing).

## **Start small**

Initial practice sessions don’t need to be long, maybe only two minutes for the first couple of sessions. The goal is to develop a routine and a *habit*, not to become a virtuoso in a month! At first, don’t worry if you don’t get through everything the teacher sets for the week, just keep things short and happy. In time the sessions will naturally get longer and you will be able to cover more material.

Very young children typically have short attention spans, they have not learned to concentrate for long periods of time. You can work on concentration and focus as a brief introduction signalling the start of each practice session. Some examples might be a staring competition, or quietly turning an object over in their hand for 30 seconds (timed). Perhaps the object is a particularly desirable soft toy that can only come out at practice sessions, to be explored quietly at the beginning, and then sat to “watch” the rest of the session! A “settle your glitter” jar is also a wonderful tool. Put glitter, water and glycerine in a jar, screw the lid on tightly and shake it up. The aim is to watch it quietly as the glitter settles to the bottom. Very young children may not be able to focus for that long, but it will give them something to work towards each day. As they improve the parent can say “wow, you almost made it until all the glitter settled today!” If a child gets really good at this, parents can always add more glitter or use sand timers in order to extend their focus even further!

Older children can also benefit from doing short focus and concentration exercises, such as mindfulness meditation (close eyes, focus on breath, leave distracting thoughts of the day), in order to get themselves in the right frame of mind to practise effectively, and not waste time. A short session of mindful, thoughtful, and concentrated practice is always better than a longer session with little concentration.

### **Routine - schedule and commit**

It is well known that it takes 21 days to form a habit. Schedule a time for practice that you and the child can commit to each day; ideally it should be the same time every day. Once you've scheduled the time, you have to actually do it every single day. Remember that every session doesn't have to be very long, you just have to do a little each day. If you skip a day, go back to day one. It may be challenging at first, but work through any resistance. This is a valuable life skill. I (and many others) find it is much harder to start from a point where there is no routine, than it is to keep an existing routine going. Remembering this keeps me going when I think maybe we could skip a day...

Another way to build new habits is to "attach" them to existing habits, so that you flow seamlessly from one to the next. The existing habit acts like a preparation, or a reminder, that the new habit is coming up next. In our house we do practice after breakfast, so the habit of eating breakfast flows naturally into the habit of music practice. When we started the post-breakfast practice habit, I expected that there would be resistance and complaints, however there never were! I think my girls were so happy to be spending one on one time with Mummy, with my attention focused solely on them, and having me be so proud/happy/supportive of them, that they didn't see anything to complain about. Who wouldn't want that every day!! Also, instead of calling it music practice, I sold it to them as "Mummy and Esther piano time" or "Mummy and Anise time" (we may also have sung a little song about it...). To make this work I do have to watch the clock, and be as organised as possible so that we leave for school on time. There are, of course, interruptions and challenges, but we try hard to keep the habit in place.

### **End on a happy note**

If you end a practice session feeling happy, the child (and parent) will be far more likely to want to repeat the session again. As a parent you may want to urge your child to do one more exercise or one more repetition, but be on the look out for signs that they are about to lose their cool. You may find that one more exercise just pushes them over their limit of concentration and you have a battle on your hands. Don't feel bad about finishing a practice session before you've completed every task the teacher has assigned. If the child is not happy and engaged, there is no point pushing it. You can always come back and play that extra song at a later time.

As well as the focus and concentration games described above, there are a lot of ideas you can use to gradually extend amount of time that children are happy and engaged in a practice session. For parents who are not experienced teachers, it takes some effort to remember these

strategies and implement them, especially as parents are often simultaneously trying to keep more than one child happy, as well as doing (or worrying that they are *not* doing) necessary household tasks.

Here are some ideas to keep young children engaged:

- Write out all their pieces and exercises onto small squares of paper. Put them all in a box or envelope. Children can draw out one square at a time and play what is written on it. They could also roll a dice to see how many times they have to play!
- Give children choices (albeit limited) so they feel like they have some control - for example “do you want to play X first or Y first?”
- Ask the child to play the piece/exercise again in a different character - for example like a hopping frog, like a fish swimming, like a sunny day (you can get many repetitions this way!), and ask them which version they liked the best and why. This will really help develop listening and analytical skills.
- After they have played a song or exercise, ask the child to analyse their own playing. My daughter’s class does “two stars and a wish”. The child names two things they thought they did really well, and one thing they would like to improve on.
- Get some stickers and let the child give themselves a sticker every time they play a song or exercise well.

### **The long term view**

Having a long term view and keeping the broader benefits of music learning in mind helps to keep things in perspective, especially on days when practice is a challenge. We begin music lessons because we recognise that listening to and playing music can enrich our lives. Not only do children learn valuable life skills that will be pertinent in all aspects of their lives, but they very often become part of a community, for example by being part of their school band or local youth orchestra. This has a positive affect on their wellbeing.

When practising music with a child, it helps to focus on *the kind of person* you are helping the child to become, rather than *what things the child can do*. Are we helping a child to be a person who tries again if they don’t get something right the first time, a person who problem solves and develops strategies to untangle difficulties? Or is the goal to have the child perform a certain number of increasingly difficult tasks on an instrument? The first scenario is the long term view, and in this scenario both parent and student are much more likely to have a happy and positive music practice experience.

### **Some other ideas for successful practice sessions**

- Other creative expressions connected to the music can also be included in practice. For example, listening to music you are learning, using colours to draw/depict the mood of a song, dancing to music.
- Consider having the child create and decorate their own practice charts. They could chart when they are going to practice and what they are going to play in each practice session. If they are very young, a parent can write the words and the child can decorate the chart, perhaps with drawings that represent each song. Children often have a great time ticking off items on their list as they complete each one! Incidentally, *scheduling* and *monitoring* are known to increase the chance of successfully forming a new habit.
- Record a video of your child playing. Children love watching themselves, and this can begin to build great analytical skills.
- Older children may use social media to record their practice, for example by doing the #100dayspracticechallenge on Instagram.

## **Reality**

Do I remember all of the above in every single practice session? No way! Sometimes I'm running in and out, brushing teeth, or stopping a sibling from interrupting.

Are my children compliant and well behaved in practice sessions? Not always. One child in particular can easily spend a large amount of time fidgeting, procrastinating, and sliding off the piano stool. That is a daily challenge for my patience and creativity.

Are my children super advanced, child prodigies? No way! Or should I say, not *yet*.

Every child is different. An approach that works beautifully with one child may be a complete failure with another. What inspires one child and gets their creativity flowing may be very different from the next child. What one child finds very easy, the next child may struggle with. I have two very different children. One is very easy to practice with, she is interested in learning new pieces and loves to practice them until she can play them fluently. She sings as she plays and is a happy ray of sunshine whenever she is making music.

The other child (who has grown up in the same household with the same parents, let us not forget), dislikes being told what to do, gets easily frustrated, doesn't listen to suggestions from parents... This behaviour doesn't mean that she doesn't want to play music or play her instrument, it just means she is a normal 6 year old! She is still learning how to control her emotions, how to handle frustrations, still learning about thinking ahead and how present actions can influence future outcomes. Despite some of the resistance she exhibits at home, she wants to be able to play music and join the school band. She loves going to her piano lessons, she identifies as being a music maker, she gets a real feeling of accomplishment when she masters something new, she uses her creativity and explores sound using the piano, and she really likes

playing a C Major scale over and over! She may not keep up music studies in the long term, but for now, when she is still very young, she is certainly gaining valuable experiences from learning an instrument. I should also note that we work very hard at making them *positive* experiences.

[Edit: Since writing the above paragraph I can report that there has been a huge change in behaviour in the child who was resisting practice! We kept up the routine, tried to make it a short and happy experience, and gave her control over what she was going to practice - we put the names of her pieces in an envelope so she can draw them out herself. She has flourished and will now initiate her own practice sessions!]

### **Being the parent**

The reality for most parents is usually far from ideal. Parents have many things competing for their attention and multiple responsibilities. This is life and we do the best we can. We learn to be flexible and deal with whatever is thrown at us, without getting too stressed or feeling like we have somehow failed. If we see ourselves (as well as our children!) as a work in progress, always learning to be the best parents, or best humans, we can be, this can help alleviate those situations when things don't go to plan, or are just plain harder than you thought they would be!

It is a lot of work for parents to remember everything and to put it all into practice, and I think we can often be tempted to give up after a failed first, or second, attempt. However, we need to heed our own growth mindset advice: I may not have organised a practice routine *yet*, but I can do it. I may fail many times before I find something that works for my family, and that is ok, we learn from all our experiences.

### **More reading/listening**

- Cogdill, Susan H, *Applying Research in Motivation and Learning to Music Education: What the Experts Say*, National Association for Music Education, Update 1-9, 2014, Sage.
- Duckworth, A, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Scribner, New York, 2016.
- Gojmerac, Ivana. (2018). Importance of Music in Education System: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323167985\\_Importance\\_of\\_Music\\_in\\_Education\\_System](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323167985_Importance_of_Music_in_Education_System)
- Goodner, Christine E, *Beyond the Music Lesson, Habits of Successful Suzuki Families*, Brookside Suzuki Strings, LLC, Oregon, 2017.
- Horman, Amy Beth <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/beyond-the/episode-2-practice-power-pBQzmT2t8Ug/>
- Rubin, G, *Better than Before: What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits - to Sleep More, to Quit Sugar, Procrastinate Less, and Generally Build a Happier Life*, Broadway Books, New York, 2015.
- Rubin, G, <https://gretchenrubin.com/podcast-episode/202-checklist-for-habit-change/>
- Suzuki Triangle - Christine Goodner <http://www.suzukitriangle.com/>

- <https://www.familyeducation.com/fun/children-music/learning-play-tips-parents-young-musicians>
- [http://www.marthabeth.com/helping\\_kids\\_practice.html](http://www.marthabeth.com/helping_kids_practice.html)
- <https://www.lifehack.org/articles/featured/18-tricks-to-make-new-habits-stick.html>
- <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/06/180625192827.htm>