

4 How to become a Suzuki family

In this fourth article about applying the Suzuki approach to piano teaching, **Jenny Macmillan** discusses the role of parents in the Suzuki support network

In common with most parents, those who become Suzuki parents are dedicated to doing their best for their children. In addition, potential Suzuki parents are very interested in education – they investigate all possibilities. A proportion of Suzuki children don't go through mainstream education, but attend schools run according to Steiner or Montessori principles or are home educated.

How is it that Suzuki children play their musical instruments so well, and how is it that they often achieve so well academically, too?

Suzuki children learn how to learn through music. They learn transferrable skills. They learn that hard work, when applied in the right way, produces good results. They learn about dedication and commitment. The family support network creates an environment which enables the development of each child's full potential.

Parental commitment

Before a child starts Suzuki lessons, there is a long period of preparation. The teacher will discuss Suzuki philosophy with both

parents, ask them to read books by and about Suzuki, and explain the commitment of a Suzuki family. The teacher will reassure parents that they can teach their child by the Suzuki approach, and assure them of the tremendous potential of all children to learn a musical instrument, just as all children can learn to speak their own language.

Parents need to create a caring, nurturing environment for their children to thrive. Musically, they need to surround their children with music by playing recordings daily of the best performances of the Suzuki repertoire and other music. They need to take their children to concerts. They can sing with them. In the teacher's studio, they will observe lessons of other young pupils, ideally for at least a term before the child's own lessons start. Many Suzuki teachers will work with one of the parents for half a term before the child starts, going through the child's first lessons and instructing the parent how to work at home with their child, possibly even teaching the parent the techniques and initial repertoire. All families are expected to join their national Suzuki group.

Now the family is well set up for children, often aged three or four, to start their own lessons. Parents sit quietly during lessons, listening and observing, and taking notes to help with practice at home. They will stay and observe another lesson after their own, ideally of a child who is a little older and more advanced. Parents will bring their children to group musicianship classes, pupils' concerts and workshops. Families are encouraged to arrange their own informal concerts. New and younger pupils are inspired by hearing older ones; older pupils have a ready audience when performing to younger ones. Moving through the Suzuki repertoire books, children and parents can see where others have gone, and what the possibilities are for themselves.

Communication between teacher and parents is very important to help families feel part of a thriving group. Many Suzuki teachers circulate a termly newsletter including not only dates of lessons, group classes and concerts, but also gems of wisdom to encourage families. They may lend parents books and articles about the Suzuki approach. They may arrange parent discussion evenings, or show videos of Suzuki concerts and workshops.



Practice

The role of the parent is to love, nurture, support and encourage their child. At first practices will be very short, but they must be regular, frequent and focused. The parent will guide the practice, repeating the lesson at home, offering plenty of encouragement and moral support. Parents can help young children to develop good practice habits, such as repeating short sections of a piece slowly and accurately, listening carefully to the sound, rather than attempting to play through a complete piece untidily.

Suzuki children are motivated to practise because they are provided with a good learning environment, with a pleasant, relaxed, optimistic atmosphere. Children receive praise and encouragement from their parents, who try to stimulate their children's natural desire to learn and build their self-esteem by emphasising their strong points.

Supervising practices requires skill, tact, perseverance and imagination. Suzuki parents are guided by the teacher to be sensitive to the child's needs. Parents are taught not to scold or get angry. They need to express their love through patience, kindness and respect. This will help develop a close relationship between the parent and child, which is a reward in itself. Children flourish on gentle guidance, no criticism and plenty of praise. Many parents find being a Suzuki parent one of the most challenging jobs they have ever tackled. Teachers encourage parents by letting them know how much they are appreciated.

As children approach secondary school age, parents retire gently into the background. If a good three-way relationship has been built up from the beginning between the parent, teacher and child, this weaning process will be much smoother. The ultimate aim of education is to enable the pupil to become independent. Instilling secure learning habits is a good start.

Many research studies have demonstrated that parental involvement is critical to children's musical achievement. One such major research project was carried out in the 1990s by a team led by John Sloboda at Keele University¹. They found that the most musically able children had the highest levels of parental support. The teacher-parent interaction was found to be of vital importance. They believe parental involvement is often critical in determining whether the child persists or gives up and that high levels of musical achievement are likely to be unattainable without supportive parental

involvement. They also claim that the more crucial determinant of the musical achievement of children is not the musical literacy of the parents, but rather the level of support and time commitment which the parents are willing and able to make. Parental involvement in the early stages of instrumental learning is thought to be a better predictor of student achievement than other factors such as musical aptitude test results.

Suzuki families

Contrary to expectations, 'musical' parents don't always make the best Suzuki parents. Children from families with no tradition of music-making can make excellent progress. Ideal are those parents who have had a year or two of lessons as children – they know a little about music, and are also aware of some of the complexities of learning an instrument.

As one Suzuki parent explains²:

'I have a genuine admiration for what Isabel achieves on the piano because I know how difficult it can be. I understand what Isabel is aiming for with each piece, and this means we can celebrate her micro-achievements together.'

Here is a typical scenario of a Suzuki family³. Both parents would describe themselves as fairly unmusical, though they had some piano lessons at school. They both feel a good general education should include some music. They both help their young children daily with practice – not only on piano but also on violin and cello, which the parents have never themselves played. Both children are thoroughly enjoying their music-making. Not only that, they are making excellent progress. When Suzuki was first recommended to this family, they tried to avoid it as they thought it sounded like some kind of sect. However, when they eventually took a closer look and observed some lessons, they saw immediately that here was a wonderful opportunity. They now consider their involvement with Suzuki to be one of the most important decisions they ever made.

To quote from an article by the mother:

'And now our Suzuki approach is so familiar to us that we apply it to other areas. The children know that, to achieve excellence in anything, they need incremental steps, revision, support, and a long-term view.'

And to quote from the article the views of her daughter (age 12)⁴:

'I felt sorry for the kids at school. Most quit

by the end of year six. They didn't seem to know how to practise, and their Mums didn't know how to help them. Although I practise for a total of an hour and a half each day, I love everything about it – playing from memory, having loads of repertoire, playing in masses of concerts, attending workshops, having lots of Suzuki friends, playing together for fun, being able to read new music, and feeling that it's one big family group.'

Suzuki families start off completely ordinary, but become extraordinary as they are drawn into the Suzuki network – they become committed, dedicated. Why? Because of the encouragement they receive from their teacher; because of the amazing results they see in their teacher's other pupils and developing in their own young children.

I am not aware of any Suzuki teachers who select new pupils. That would be entirely contrary to Suzuki philosophy. If the teacher has a vacancy, a prospective new family is invited to observe lessons and the parents will be invited to discuss the Suzuki approach and the commitment of a Suzuki family. At that stage one new parent commented to me, unprompted, 'But you are teaching the whole child!'

Suzuki himself wished to create an environment in which children grew to be wonderful people. That they may become fine musicians is of secondary importance. His approach teaches children and parents to focus their efforts, and they soon learn that correctly directed effort produces results. With this comes a sense of success and achievement on the part of both child and parent. This in turn builds their confidence and self-esteem. The skills developed – concentration, memory, self-discipline, co-operation, the ability to tackle a problem by dividing it into several manageable parts – stay with them for life.

As with all things, the more one puts in, the more one gets out. Suzuki teachers, knowing the huge possibilities of the teaching approach, and having spent several years training, tend to be very dedicated. They have very high expectations. And parents, having put in a great deal of effort before their children even started lessons, tend to be very committed. The results are to be seen in the positive and energetic lives of Suzuki families.

The next article in this series will examine the Suzuki piano repertoire, showing how musical skills and techniques are developed

1. Davidson, J.W., Howe, M.J.A., Moore, D.G. & Sloboda, J.A. (1996) The role of parental influences in the development of musical performance. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 14: 399-412
2. Collison, D. (2007) Notes from a Suzuki parent, *Piano Professional*, January 2007: p26
3. Wauchope, A. (2007) Notes from a Suzuki family, *Piano Professional*, January 2007: p24
4. Ralph, A. (2007) Notes from a Suzuki family, *Piano Professional*, January 2007: p25