

Involving parents: a survey of attitudes

by Jenny Macmillan

This article follows on from my literature review on involving parents in the last issue of *Piano Professional* (April 2005: pp13-17).

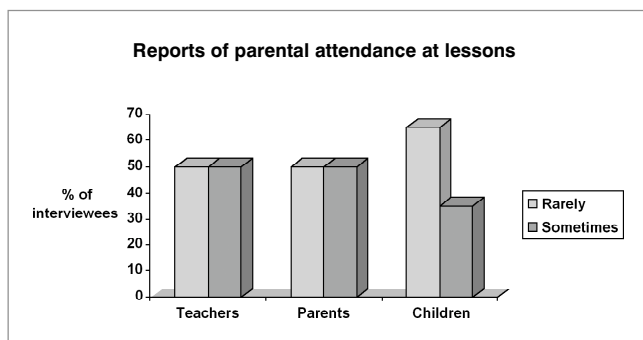
I SHOWED that numerous studies in general education concluded that parental involvement improves student achievement, that parents are critical to children's successes during their school years, and that parents want to be positively and productively involved in the life and work of their children in school. Within music education, large-scale surveys by Davidson, Howe, Moore & Sloboda demonstrate that musical achievement is linked to high levels of parental involvement, and that teachers' attitudes are vital. They found that almost all children selected for entry to a specialist music school had parents who took an active participatory role in music lessons and daily practice, and that parental involvement is critical as to whether the child persists or gives up. It is clear that the issue of parental involvement which, in my experience, is not commonly practised in music, is a subject worthy of further study.

Having read the literature, which is supportive of parental involvement, but knowing few music teachers who encourage it, I carried out a survey to investigate:

1. What are instrumental teachers' attitudes to parental involvement in children's music lessons and practices?
2. What do those teachers who promote parental involvement actually encourage parents to do?
3. How do parents support their children musically?
4. Does increased parental involvement raise pupil enjoyment and achievement?

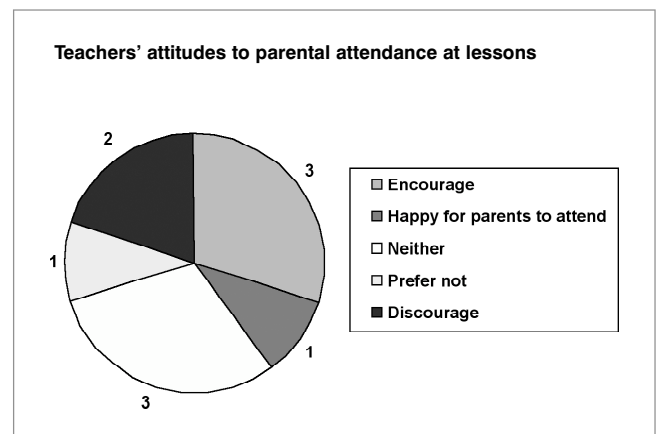
I conducted 50 face-to-face interviews – with 10 piano teachers (members of EPTA), 20 of their pupils (aged 10 and 14), and 20 parents (one parent of each pupil).

Parental attendance at lessons



The teachers told me that half the parents of their pupils rarely or never attend lessons, and that half the parents (generally of younger pupils) sometimes attend (see previous chart). How the parents are involved varies – some teachers ask parents to sit at the other end of the room, other teachers speak to the parents and give them specific tasks to practise at home with their child.

Half the parents report that they almost never attend lessons, the other half who say they sometimes attend, do so mostly in the early years. Those who do not attend say they don't want to intrude, that they feel no legitimate reason to attend, and that they think their child would prefer it if they were not there. Those who do attend do so for a variety of reasons – for convenience, for their own interest and enjoyment and, in some cases, so they can help their child.



The chart above shows that four teachers in my sample encourage or are happy for parents to attend lessons, three do not mention attendance, and three discourage parents or would prefer them not to attend lessons. Teachers themselves vary between those who positively encourage attendance of all parents, through those who encourage attendance of parents of younger pupils but feel it is inappropriate for those of older pupils, to those who positively discourage attendance apart from the very first lesson.

Teachers in my sample give the following reasons for discouraging parental attendance at lessons:

- They feel that parents tend to interfere during lessons and that they can be pushy. They wish to have a relaxed and informal lesson so the pupil can enjoy it.
- They feel the presence of another adult inhibits the intimacy between the teacher and pupil, and that they

would be aware of the parent instead of focusing on the child.

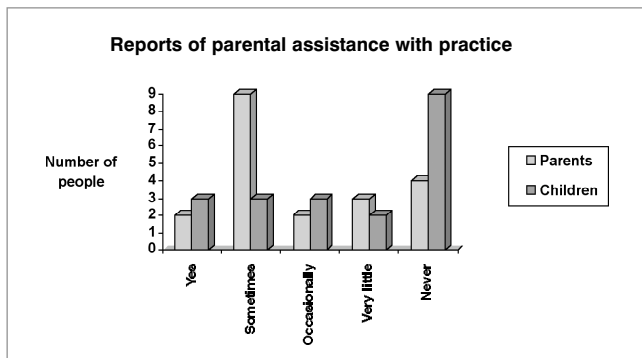
- They say parental attendance makes it difficult for children to take responsibility for their own practice.
- One teacher didn't want to be observed during lessons, as though she were on a training course.

Teachers seem to prefer a known situation (one-to-one teacher and pupil) rather than an unfamiliar one involving also the parent. There was no evidence that teachers show "interfering" parents how they can usefully assist their child – teachers find it easier to exclude the parent entirely. They are unwilling to see any value in parental involvement and to learn how to make use of pupils' parents.

Other teachers gave these reasons for encouraging parental attendance at lessons:

- It saves time if a parent can guide the practice.
- Young pupils cannot adequately communicate to the parent what is to be practised – the teacher can explain it to the parent.
- It is important for parents to see for themselves their child's achievements, challenges, problems and goals.

Parental assistance with practice



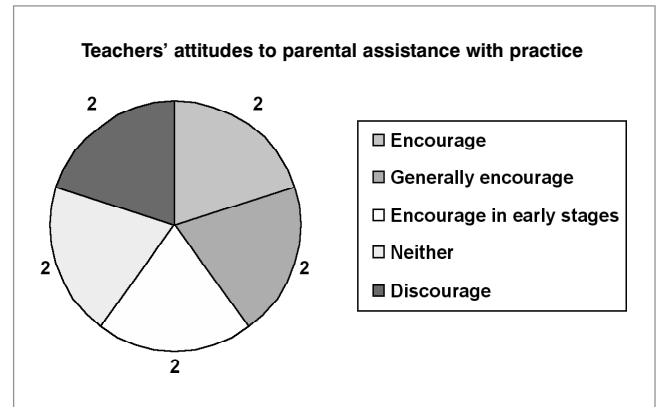
As with attendance at lessons, parents think they assist with practice far more than children feel they are helped (see chart above). Nine parents say they sometimes assist, while only three children feel they are sometimes helped. But nine children say their parents never help while only four parents say they never assist.

Ten parents (half of them) say that when they do help, they instruct their child in some way. However, some parents are unaware that help could be given. Most parents seem to underestimate their ability to help with music practice. In my small sample, I found no correlation between parental musical ability and the amount of supervision given during practice.

The overall level of parental involvement in my sample is less than that of Howe & Sloboda with their sample of 119 high achieving students at a specialist music school. At the same time, the overall achievement of the pupils in my sample is somewhat lower than that of students at a specialist music school. According to Howe & Sloboda, before admission to the music school 39 out of 42 students' parents were involved in practice sessions. It is possible that parents who feel their children are enjoying their instrument and are progressing well are more willing and more likely to attend lessons and to offer help with practice than parents of

children who are not progressing. This is the suggestion of Davidson & Borthwick in their study of the development of a child's identity as a musician. Alternatively, it may be that children who receive parental help are more likely to play well and to wish to progress to a specialist music school.

Very interestingly, children in my sample appreciate the assistance. They made comments such as: "Mum helps me work out the notes", "She helps me realise when something is wrong, then I can correct it", "Father can show me my mistakes and how to repeat the passage over and over again; he knows some of the tricks of the trade", and "Mum can help even though she doesn't play the piano". As with attendance at lessons, all children who receive help with practice, like it.



The chart above shows that two of the 10 teachers in my sample encourage parental assistance with practice, two generally encourage it, two encourage it in the early stages, two neither encourage nor discourage it, and two positively discourage it. Just what the parents are expected to do is usually left rather vague. Teachers rarely give specific instructions as to how parents might help at practices. Teachers think parents may "help the child do what the notebook asks them to do", but they say they "do not really have a clear idea".

These are the reasons teachers give for discouraging parental assistance with practice:

- Teachers wish pupils to be independent.
- Parental interference or over-involvement may be discouraging.
- Confusion can arise.

Of the five teachers who mention that they wish pupils to be independent in their practice, one does not even want parents to encourage practice to take place. Several teachers report parents who became over-involved, or interfered, with practising. Their reaction has been to discourage parents from assisting, rather than to intervene, discuss the issue with the parent and work out ways in which the parent could constructively be involved. For instance, one respondent taught a father and son, and "both took the same exam at the same time. The father gained a higher mark than his son. Clearly this over-involvement had a discouraging effect on the boy". However, this seems a weak argument against parental involvement – the father could have taken the exam at a different grade, or a different board, or a different time, from his son.

Three teachers reported the risk of confusion "because in a very few cases the parent said different things" from the

teacher or “made demands that I do not make”. With tact and careful handling, a teacher should be able to deal with such a situation with little damage to the child’s progress and enjoyment. More difficult to understand is the teacher who is “happy for the child not to understand, because then I can explain it again at the next lesson. It is better that the child should understand what I have said directly than rely on the parent to interpret what I have said”.

Conflict can arise, particularly when there is little communication between teacher and parent. One parent, whose son’s teacher discourages parental involvement in practice, says: “I listen to the CD of his exam pieces so I know how they should sound, and listen to his performance, and try to help him make it sound the same ... Oh no, my son doesn’t listen to the CD ... No, the teacher doesn’t know about this, but I find it useful.” So here is a parent who does not herself play the piano, wishing to help her son, given no guidance from the teacher, surreptitiously doing what she can to help.

Similarly, another mother herself started piano lessons (with another teacher) when her son started, and learns his pieces so she can help him. She likes to sit in on lessons and do what she can at practices. The teacher does not seem to be aware of this arrangement.

Those six teachers who encourage parental assistance with practice believe that the increase in discipline increases the quality of the practice, which increases the effectiveness of the practice. They also mention the enjoyment factor – that playing music together is more fun than playing on one’s own. These six teachers consider parental assistance particularly useful:

- in the early stages of learning the piano,
- for younger pupils, and
- when preparing for examinations.

Research questions examined

1 What are teachers’ attitudes to parental involvement?

Teachers in my sample were equally divided in their views on parental involvement in children’s music lessons and practices. Teachers who discourage parental involvement put forward many convincing arguments – that parents tend to interfere, parents inhibit the development of an independent pupil-teacher relationship, teachers want children to be independent in their practice, and parental over-involvement may be discouraging or confusing. Conversely, other teachers give good reasons for encouraging parental involvement – that it is beneficial for parents to see in lesson their children’s achievements, challenges, problems and goals, that practice is more efficient when supervised and that it is best to explain it directly to the parent, and they emphasise the enjoyment of parent and child making music together.

Although evidence from many researchers indicates that parental involvement is beneficial, even crucial, for high achievement on a musical instrument, some teachers in my sample prefer to work on a one-to-one basis with the pupil, with minimum contact with the parent. Even when the parent wishes to be involved, these teachers do their best to exclude the parent. None attempts to show the parent how to assist positively, even though parental involvement is welcomed by those children who have experienced it.

2 What do teachers encourage parents to do?

In my sample, the teachers’ promotion of parental involvement was very varied. At the end of lessons, some teachers discuss the lesson. Some teachers invite parents to follow the lesson with a view to helping with practice, or they draw the parent’s attention to good achievements. Other teachers are not specific about what parents should do, and the parents sit at the other end of the room, and either read, or listen to the lesson.

Only one of the 10 teachers in my sample instructs the parents (of her younger pupils) how to supervise their children’s practice on a moment-by-moment basis. Other teachers ask parents to encourage practice to take place, help if the child asks, read the notebook, act as an appreciative audience, and engage in ensemble playing with the child. Again, often teachers are not specific about what they wish parents to do. Often they don’t even mention parental involvement.

3 How do parents support their children musically?

Parental support varies from family to family. Some parental involvement occurs without the teacher being aware of it. Where there is very little communication between teacher and parent, there can be differences between the teacher’s and the parent’s perception of the parent’s role in practice.

Involvement at lessons amongst my respondents varies between never attending, reading a book during the lesson and not talking to the teacher at all, not attending but discussing the lesson with the teacher when collecting the child, and listening to the lesson and discussing it with the teacher at the end. None of the 20 interviewed parents


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Involving parents

- ▶ reported being encouraged to do anything in particular during the lessons.

Although teachers often speak to parents at the end of the lesson, no parents report taking notes to help with practice at home. Parents say they may encourage practice to take place, ensure everything gets practised, instruct their child, engage in ensemble playing, listen when asked, or encourage their child. Several parents say they would like to make music with their child but consider they are not good enough. However, I found that many musically untrained parents are willing and able to assist their children with practice.

Other parents have no conception that help could be given. They seem to underestimate their ability to help with music practice. If teachers were to guide parents and build their confidence, both teachers and parents might discover that parents are able to contribute a great deal.

4 Does increased parental involvement raise pupil enjoyment and achievement?

To investigate this, I used indicators of enjoyment and achievement which included level of enjoyment of practising, amount of listening to music, playing for pleasure and playing music not set by the teacher, and the levels of the pieces being learned at the piano. Unfortunately, I found no significant correlation between parental involvement and pupil enjoyment and achievement in my sample. In this, my results do not accord with the findings of Sloboda and his colleagues that more parental involvement increases pupil achievement.

One reason for lack of correlation between parental involvement and pupil achievement may be the widely varied nature of the pupils in such a small sample. Another difficulty is that of accurately assessing a child's achievement at the piano. The teachers I interviewed tended to offer their most capable pupils for interview. Perhaps capable, intrinsically motivated pupils will often do well whatever the teaching, and it is the average and less good pupils who need careful nurturing. Also, potentially, a highly skilled teacher who does not encourage parental involvement could get better pupil results than a less skilled teacher who encourages parental involvement. There are many variables which contribute to a child's progress on a musical instrument.

Connection between teacher qualifications and encouragement of parental involvement

Although my research failed to find a link between teacher encouragement of parental involvement and pupil achievement, I have discovered a connection between teacher qualifications and encouragement of parental involvement. Teachers in my sample who are the most likely to encourage parental involvement are those who have initially received training in teaching skills, have followed specialist courses, have been teaching for the longest, and have the most pupils. In contrast, those who have received no initial teacher training, have not followed specialist

courses, and have less teaching experience, discourage or do not discuss parental involvement.

Teachers' attitudes to parental involvement may be moulded by what they learn on teaching courses. Therefore, if children progress further with more parental involvement, for children to receive the best possible instrumental tuition, my study indicates that they need to be taught by experienced people trained in pedagogy as well as in music.

Summary

My literature review reveals overwhelming support for the notion of involving parents in general education and, additionally, in instrumental learning. My survey findings show that some teachers discourage parental involvement, and they give good reasons for doing so. Other teachers encourage it, although few of them demonstrate full awareness of the many ways in which parents can support their children. Those more likely to encourage parental involvement are experienced teachers who have received initial pedagogical training and then followed specialist music courses.

While some parents are unaware of the value of their potential input, others assist their children without the teacher's knowledge. It is evident from my research that parents are more able to act as an intermediary between the teacher and the child than teachers realise. It is not necessary for parents to be musically trained to help their children. *Crucially, children who receive help, welcome it.* For all these reasons, even though I was not able to show that parental involvement led to greater achievement, there are good grounds for believing it is of benefit to pupils and should be encouraged.

A key issue seems to be training parents to help in a positive, non-critical way. To be successfully involved, it is necessary that parents have confidence in their own potential to contribute. Therefore, it is essential for instrumental teachers to build parents' confidence in their ability to make a difference to their children's development.

Recommendations

First, given the compelling evidence in the literature that musical achievement is linked to high levels of parental involvement, and my research that indicates that instrumental teachers are more likely to promote parental involvement if they have training and experience, parents should select music teachers who have studied education as well as music.

Second, given the importance of the pedagogical aspect of training for instrumental teachers, and the fact that very many performers will do some teaching, all instrumental music courses should include a pedagogical element.

And third, there is a need for researchers and teachers to publish widely in teachers' journals with examples of evidence of successful parental involvement to demonstrate to other teachers how it can be done, and to inspire and encourage them to do likewise. ▶

<h2>Advantages of parental involvement</h2>	<h2>Disadvantages of parental involvement</h2>
<p>Points made by my 50 research interviewees combined with ideas drawn from 40 piano, violin and cello teachers at a teacher training workshop</p>	
<h3>Advantages for the child</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More progress and achievement – increased discipline increases quality of practice which increases effectiveness of practice ● More efficient – saves time if parent can guide practice ● More effective – parent can help child practise correctly and consistently ● Playing music together is more fun ● Personal and social development – enriches child's life, raises self-esteem, opportunity to succeed in front of parent, special time with parent – reassuring, motivating and encouraging 	<h3>Disadvantages for the child</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of independence – prevents free-thinking of child ● Parental interference or over-involvement may be discouraging ● Pressure of overbearing parent, or one whose expectations are too high – fear of failure or disapproval ● Issues of authority – confusion can arise ● Parent may misunderstand philosophy – all work and no play ● Relationship between parent and teacher could hinder child's progress ● Issue of when parent should disengage and let child become independent
<h3>Advantages for the parent</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enjoyable and satisfying to be part of child's learning process, to gain insight into how child learns and to see child's achievements, challenges, problems and goals ● Parent may learn from teacher about positive language and views ● May improve parent/child relationship 	<h3>Disadvantages for the parent</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stressful ● Time-consuming ● Boring ● Problem of managing siblings ● Other parent could feel excluded ● Expectations could be too high ● Could damage parent/child relationship
<h3>Advantages for the teacher</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Saves time - parent can take notes during lesson ● More progress - parent can help with practice and can interpret teacher's comments ● Quality, quantity and consistency of practice leads to satisfaction of seeing good progress ● Enjoyable to relate to more members of pupil's family – trusting relationship and friendship ● Important insight into home situation 	<h3>Disadvantages for the teacher</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attendance inhibits independent pupil-teacher relationship ● Parent may interfere - teacher may want relaxed and enjoyable lesson with no distractions ● Teacher may not wish to be observed - may prefer one-to-one situation ● More preparation required and time-consuming to maintain ● Difficult to manage parent expectations with pushy parents ● Parent may undermine teacher's authority ● May be issues of musical interpretation and technique if parent is musically experienced ● Possible conflict between parent and child

■ *Jenny Macmillan is a Suzuki piano teacher in Cambridge. She is Regional Organiser for EPTA Cambridgeshire. The research project of these two articles formed part of her studies for an MA in Psychology for Musicians at Sheffield University.*

References

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