

feature

Parental involvement: children's enjoyment and achievement

By Jenny Macmillan

Do any of you parents think there are things your child's teacher is encouraging you to do that you feel you really do not have time for, or cannot see the point in doing? Perhaps you reckon that other teachers would make different recommendations anyway, so you need not pay attention to what your teacher says?

Much research has been undertaken into how children learn best, and what are the most effective teaching strategies. Although there seem to have been no direct studies into the benefits of Dr Suzuki's teaching methods (certainly in this country), inevitably many researchers have touched on aspects of his ideas.

I recently investigated the effect on pupils of piano teachers' attitudes to parents being involved in the learning process. I interviewed 50 people – 10 teachers, 20 pupils and 20 parents – to ask about their attitudes and experiences. The teachers were members of the European Piano Teachers' Association, so they all had piano teaching qualifications and/or experience, but none was a Suzuki teacher. Many of the results support Dr Suzuki's beliefs, but some may make us pause for thought.

Instrumental teachers' attitudes to parental involvement... at lessons

Some teachers in my survey encourage parental attendance at lessons and give good reasons for doing so. They report practice is more efficient when supervised and that young pupils cannot adequately communicate to the parent what needs to be practised, so they themselves like to explain it directly to the parent. They believe it is beneficial for parents to see in lessons their

children's achievements, challenges, problems and goals. Conversely other teachers, who discourage parental involvement, put forward various convincing arguments for not involving the parent in lessons. They report that parents tend to interfere during lessons, and that parental attendance inhibits the development of an independent pupil-teacher relationship and makes it difficult for children to take responsibility for their own practice.

...and at practices

Some teachers recognise that the discipline of parental involvement can improve the effectiveness of the practice, and emphasise the enjoyment of parent and child making music together. But those teachers who discourage parental involvement with practice again give good reasons. They wish children to be independent in their practice, they consider parental interference or over-involvement may be discouraging to the child, and they feel confusion can arise if parents are involved.

The benefits of parental involvement

Although evidence from many researchers, for example by John Sloboda and his colleagues, indicates that parental involvement is beneficial, even crucial, for high achievement on a musical instrument, some teachers whom I interviewed 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.

It is evident that teachers in my sample love teaching and seeing the enjoyment and achievement of their pupils. However, many of them are not involving parents, which is widely accepted in general education as good practice for bringing out the best in children (see, for example, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation publication on parental involvement).

Key points to children's enjoyment and achievement

My study shows that children enjoy their music more if parents have sung to them as babies, if they are frequently taken to live performances, and if the parents now sing or play instruments. The enjoyment and achievement of the teenagers I interviewed relate to the amount siblings play instruments, and the frequency with which they attend live performances.

Certain signs of enjoyment suggest that, while of less immediate effect on the enjoyment and achievement of children at primary school, they may be important to encourage at an early age so pupils enjoy music and achieve highly as teenagers. These include developing a good practice routine, playing music not set by the teacher, playing for pleasure, and listening to music, especially classical. Conversely, it is possible that children who are already enjoying their music-making and are achieving well, will be motivated to do these things. Those children who themselves chose to start learning the piano, and who began lessons at an early age, also tend to enjoy making music and achieve well.

Other aspects may affect pupil enjoyment and achievement. Points noted by the teachers I interviewed include the teacher's relationship with the pupil, the benefit of pupils' concerts, and the fact that enjoyment may be dependent on making progress and progress dependent on enjoyment. Points noted by the children include the parent attending lessons, playing duets with their teacher or parent, hearing the improvement in pieces after practising them and being able to master each piece, messing around at the piano, and liking their teacher. Points noted by the parents include the teachers' encouragement, parental interest in their child's music-making, the parent assisting at practice, and the parent playing

alongside the child or playing duets with the child.

I believe most Suzuki parents and teachers score highly in most of these areas. However, some interesting issues are raised.

My own experience of involving parents

Teachers' concerns about parents interfering in lessons are not borne out in my own experience. Very few of my Suzuki parents ever "interfere" during lessons – most of them are very well-behaved(!), sit quietly, pay attention, and make notes for home practice. I personally do not feel that "parental attendance inhibits the development of an independent pupil-teacher relationship." While some of my pupils are very quiet in their lessons, others are rather lively and talkative, according to their personalities. I hope the ideas of parental interference or over-involvement being discouraging, or confusion arising if parents are involved in practice do not apply to your Suzuki group. Communication is important here, and I think the Suzuki approach encourages regular communication between parent, teacher and child.





The point made by some teachers that “parental attendance ... makes it difficult for children to take responsibility for their own practice” is worth considering carefully. I actually do not want three, four, five and six year olds to be responsible for their own practice. I very much rely on my Suzuki parents to create a good practice routine. But, on the other hand, most 15 and 16 year olds do need to take responsibility for their own practice. Developing from one state to the other requires careful nurturing. It will be different in every family and with each child within the family. There are no simple guidelines. It is a matter of all of us carefully feeling our way, being aware that we need to help each child progress as smoothly as possible from one state to the other. If parents let go too early, the discipline of practice disintegrates, progress slows down, and children lose interest. Every so often we need to experiment with the child taking responsibility for an area of practice – be it review, or scales, or sight-reading, or whatever – but with the parent being ready to return and assist if the child is not yet ready to become independent. I particularly welcome parents raising this issue with me on a

regular basis, either in lesson or by email. They are the ones who know the situation at home, and can best inform me.

How parents can help

I think we all know the enjoyment of making music together, whether singing in a choir, playing in an orchestra or small group, playing duets, or just playing one hand on the piano while someone else plays the other. Most Suzuki parents do lots of it with their children – now you can have even more fun in the confident knowledge that it is beneficial! Also, sing to your babies and young children as much as possible, and/or play an instrument when your children are around. Listen daily to plenty of classical music as well as to recordings of the Suzuki repertoire.

How often do you take your children to live performances? I know it can be difficult to locate suitable events. Ask your teacher and look on the internet for local events, and attend local, regional and national Suzuki concerts. Perhaps one parent can organise a group booking for several families.

Two things are difficult (impossible?) to encourage: playing music not set by the teacher and playing for pleasure. You obviously cannot instruct your children to go and play their instrument for pleasure. On the other hand if they doodle for a few moments you can express your pleasure (but do not be too obvious about it with teenagers!). Or if, during your practice together, your children start to enjoy making up their own music, let them do that and encourage them to develop their own ideas at their instrument. Obviously, if this just becomes a diversionary tactic, you have to limit it to some extent, eg make it a reward after some good practice on something specific, or perhaps you could accommodate it more on a Saturday, or another day when you can be more relaxed about time.

Two more key features of children’s enjoyment and achievement, which are apparent in other research studies (such as Susie O’Neill’s Young People and Music Participation Project), are learning other instruments and playing in groups. If your children are aged seven or eight, do encourage them to start another instrument. If they are older, and have already started and

stopped another instrument, encourage them to start a different one – one instrument or teacher may suit a child better than another one. And if they are already playing another instrument, encourage them to join a group – an orchestra or band. And encourage all children to sing in choirs.

In summary, my research findings and my experience as a Suzuki teacher suggest that parents should:

- Sing to child from birth onwards (and even before!)
- Listen to music, especially classical
- Take child to lessons from an early age
- Attend child's lessons
- Develop a good practice routine
- Assist at practice
- Play alongside child and/or play duets
- Encourage child to play music not set by teacher – to play for pleasure
- Encourage child to learn second instrument
- Encourage child to join choir or instrumental ensemble
- Themselves play instruments or sing
- Take child to live performances

The views in this article were gathered from teachers and parents who are not part of the Suzuki fraternity. They are the opinions of conventional piano teachers, pupils and their parents, and other researchers. Although these findings will not come as a surprise to those involved in the Suzuki approach, it seems to

me essential that we examine and re-examine the benefits of the Suzuki philosophy. ♪

Jenny Macmillan is a fully qualified Suzuki piano teacher with a thriving practice in Cambridge, and is also a BSI instructor. She was recently awarded a distinction for her MA in Psychology for Musicians in which she studied, amongst other topics, teachers' attitudes to parental involvement. Longer articles on this and other topics appear on her website: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk.

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Thank You!

Southbank International School in Hampstead runs a core curriculum group Suzuki programme for children up to Grade 5 and the BSI would like to thank them for their donation of money raised with a bake and pizza sale!

The photo shows (from left to right): PTA President Andrew Eborn, Suzuki Teacher Jane Afia, Chairman of Charities Committee Chandra Eborn