



Hilary Dawson

# Things I wish I had known when my children were young

*I just want her to do it for fun  
We'll give it a try and see if she takes to it*

*I don't want to force her to play*

All teachers have heard some of the above from the parents of prospective pupils but not all teachers engage in the parent education which encourages parents to explore and rethink these statements in a constructive way. Indeed, for some traditional piano teachers, parents are an unfortunate necessity. When these teachers emerge from the isolation of their studios and get together they often let off steam, and some of that steam is directed at parents who are guilty of all sorts of crimes: unsatisfactory pupil punctuality and attendance, lack of commitment, undermining the teacher, failing to

support practice ... The list goes on. Yet all parents, with very few exceptions, love their children and want the best for them, and 'piano parents' have taken an important first step in deciding that music is part of that best, and arranging lessons with a teacher of their choice. From then on Suzuki teachers believe that a crucial part of their job is to educate the parent corner of the Suzuki teacher-parent-child triangle, integrating them into the process and convincing them that 'the child's destiny is in the hands of the parents'.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this process is not static. Parenting roles change with time as the child grows and develops but Suzuki parents have the advantage of having a community within which to reflect and work on their ongoing role. These notes draw strongly on a presentation given

<sup>1</sup> Schinichi Suzuki. *Nurtured By Love*, Amerion Limited, 1996

**some of that steam is directed at parents who are guilty of all sorts of crimes**

by Caroline Fraser at Jenny Macmillan's Cambridge Suzuki Training course in April 2018 during which we heard and watched filmed evidence of how, with ongoing parental commitment and understanding, the Suzuki way works in all sorts of cultures and communities: rich and poor, rural or city, British or Peruvian. I am, however, all too aware of how easy it is to write about parenting and how very challenging it is in practice and so I have chosen to write this brief paper as a series of points I wish I had known thirty years ago – the **TEMPER** acronym is no coincidence!

**'tiny, powerful'**

**Think long term. Believe every child can learn to play beautifully and in the process develop important tools and qualities for life.**

*I thought my children might be able to play beautifully but I didn't know. I was guilty in my mind of 'ranking' them as young children according to the beauty of their singing. Number 1 did not score highly as a young child but I watched as she led the way in showing me how her violin playing and the qualities of self discipline, determination and resilience fed each other. Memorable moments: 'What do you mean – of course I have to play the violin!' (This after her ignorant mother had said something along the lines of 'If it's too hard or tiring you could give it up, my dear'!!!) 'There's always next year, mum' (after not achieving an expected placing at a music festival – and there was a next year!).*

*Ten years from now, the fact that your child has both the self-discipline to get what they need done and the grace for themselves to know not every day is going to be exactly ideal – now that is life-changing! Ten years from now, when*

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**An important part of our ongoing role as parents is to make sure that there is an audience for music in the future**

*your child encounters a big obstacle or goal in life and knows they can succeed if they just break it down in little pieces and work on things one at a time – that is a skill that sets them apart.*

Christine Goodner<sup>2</sup>

Prospective parents who have read *Nurtured by Love* and articles recommended by the teacher will understand the fundamentals of the Suzuki philosophy. If they have observed lessons and had some lessons themselves they will understand that they are signing up for the long haul. As Christine Goodner points out, 'It's a marathon, not a sprint'. In his book *The Talent Code*<sup>3</sup> Daniel Coyle describes an experiment which demonstrated that a 'tiny, powerful' idea planted in a child's head before they started lessons (he doesn't say where the idea came from but my guess is that it was hotwired from the parents) was **the** determining factor in a child's musical progress. That determining factor was the child's expectation that they would be playing their instrument for many years. He concludes that with the same amount of practice 'the long-term commitment group outperformed the short-term commitment group by 400 percent'. I am not sure how he measured this, and it would be interesting to know how many children had been influenced by the experience of seeing a parent or adult relative play an instrument, but it is interesting nonetheless. Perhaps we understand the long haul approach better for sporting activities than music because sporting excellence is so visible and so respected by adults and children. Which brings us to the question of how we establish a musical environment that attracts people.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Goodner. *Beyond the Music Lesson: Habits of Successful Suzuki Families*, Kindle Edition, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Coyle. *The Talent Code*, p102. Arrow Books, 2010

**Establish a positive musical environment for your child: set habits, listen to lots of music, make music with other people**

*In some ways I did better here. There was lots of music, recorded and live, in the house. I have vivid memories of my young son hiding in the skirts of the cellist of our quartet as she played and peeping out with a cheeky grin at key moments. As the years went by folk musicians would appear to play with Number 2 and during the teenage years complex guitar chords and sax riffs would emerge from my son's 'pit'. We went to all sorts of gigs and concerts and had favourite family 'playlists' featuring all sorts of music for the car before anybody had coined the term.*

*But 'set habits'? Oh dear! I remember telling people that I wasn't sure whether Number 1 enjoyed playing the violin – she just practised every day like she brushed her teeth. This said in a spirit of maternal gloom rather than praise. Today I know that she had it right – she just did it! And once she reached her teens it was no longer like brushing her teeth. Number 2 protested loudly, and during the teenage years practice and progress was erratic but the flute playing habit has stayed with her into adulthood. Meanwhile my anything-for-a-quiet-life son took the path of least resistance and did just enough practice to keep his mum and teacher off his back, a practised habit which continues to serve him well in all areas of life!*

Parents must come to realise the importance of creating this musical environment for their child. The language environment happens all by itself, but the musical one must be intentionally created.

Ed Kreitman, *Teaching from the Balance Point*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edward Kreitman, *Teaching from the Balance Point*, p67. West Springs School of Talent Education, 1998



Suzuki parents are going against popular culture when they **intentionally** create a musical environment. Many people's musical environment is accidental. It is formed by whatever happens to be around, typically music from the latest bands and shows. Some of my non-Suzuki pupils hardly sing and most are unaware of the musical heritage of western and other cultures. Listening (for more, see my handout for parents 'We put it in their ears first'<sup>5</sup>) must be directed by the parent when the child is young. As the child grows, it may – or may not! – be a joy to discover music which they want to share with you, and today Spotify and other online music-sharing apps make it easy for adult children and parents to continue sharing with each other. An important part of our ongoing role as parents is to make sure that there is an audience for music in the future and we know that we have succeeded when our adult children tell us about concerts and performances they've attended.

Establishing habits and routines can be equally challenging. Before lessons start Jenny Macmillan recommends that parent and child get into the habit of doing something quiet together for 15 minutes at the same time each day. This sets up a routine and, just as important, establishes this as a special time every day for parent and child when phones and other interruptions are banned.

**Model the behaviour you would like to see in your child**

*Like most parents I will admit that I didn't like my child's behaviour all the time. The teenage years can be particularly challenging. One minute your teenage child hates you, the next they desperately want a big hug. The words of my daughter's very wise music teacher have stayed with me: 'We must maintain a steady course', buffeted by wind and waves perhaps but a constant presence amid a sea of hormonal and emotional turbulence. Did I manage it all the time? No, of course not! But perhaps I might have found Ed Kreitman's ideas for 'centering' and creating a sea of calm useful. He suggests that the calmer and*

*more focused he is, 'the more drawn to me the student becomes', and this is certainly a feature of lessons I've observed. And if that didn't work? If I had been a Suzuki parent, I could have turned to the wider Suzuki community secure in the knowledge that others had been in choppy waters before me and survived!*

*Smiling parents have smiling children*  
Caroline Fraser, April 2018

*Do not hurry. This is a fundamental rule. If you hurry and collapse or tumble down, nothing is achieved. Do not rest in your efforts; this is another fundamental rule. Without stopping, without haste, carefully taking a step at a time forward will surely get you there.*

*Shinichi Suzuki, Nurtured by Love*

*I want them to see themselves as having resources, as a person whose joy is in supporting others, who is able to speak to others in a contributing way, or to a room full of people, without judging themselves or being afraid. At some point in their lives, they will discover that people, despite exterior differences, are more alike than they are different.*

*Christine Goodner, Beyond the Music Lesson*

The behaviours above are constants, relevant to teachers, parents and learners of all ages and at all stages. Perhaps I can take a shorthand version with me into old age: Smile lots, take small steps slowly, build bridges. An idea for a studio poster perhaps!

**Be Present with your child and young adult: encourage and support**

*Looking back, I think I was quite good at supporting the 'big picture'. My children knew I loved hearing them play, sitting in on their lessons and offering piano accompaniments, lifts and post-performance parties. The 'small' stuff needed me to be present with my child as they practised and develop the skill of noting practice points in such a way that they would hear and work on them. We never got there!*

*My dad loves this piece*  
Alex, age 9, arriving at his school piano lesson

*Many Olympic athletes have been cited as saying the six most important words*

*their parent said to them were 'I love to watch you play'*

*Christine Goodner, Beyond the Music Lesson*

*What children need .... is someone being present with the work .... someone who is really involved in the work and thinks about it with you. That being present with another person is extremely difficult to do .... to be present with a child .... talk to them .... ask questions like 'What's going on here?'*

*BBC Radio 3 Private Passions, Michael Berkeley with Stephan Grosz, June 2015*

For busy parents, being present is really hard. It means not checking your phone, not thinking about all the things on your to-do list, not worrying that dinner is burning .... in short, employing that underused faculty of undivided attention. It means supporting your child through active involvement in pre-teen practice and quiet 'stand-by' support in the teenage years.

Being present is essential if we are to notice the 'big' picture around our child, for example how she learns: 'She loves thinking about stories and pictures which could describe this piece – let's make up some words'. Looking with attention might prompt the realisation 'My, she's grown – the stool needs to go down!' It is just as important for noticing all the 'smaller' points of fingering, shaping, balance. Paying attention allows us to give meaningful praise and set specific practice points.

The good news is that once we have a secure base of 'being present' we can learn and develop the skills we need to offer support and encouragement. Watching skilled teachers at work I notice how they give points for practice using images and humour – 'Watch that little note – it's hot!', 'It's like opening and closing a fan' (Jenny Macmillan), 'Could finger 3 sing more?' followed by 'Please congratulate finger 3' (Caroline Fraser). Praise is specific, correction is not disapproval of the child but helps child and teacher/practice parent work together to fix a stray fingering or phrase. With younger children (and some older ones!) a soft toy, Oscar the Owl is a favourite, can offer guidance. I might ask the child 'What did Oscar hear?', 'What does Oscar say?', to which the child might reply, 'He says

slow down at the end and get softer'. The practice point is identified by the child who receives praise for good listening to the end of a piece rather than criticism for rushing through the final bars and finishing with a thumpy thumb!

Sharron Beamer also addresses the issue of developing independence in her article on The Parent-Child Relationship.<sup>6</sup> Our aim as parents and teachers is to help young children develop the habits which will enable them to realise their potential. Sharron Beamer writes, 'The ultimate aim isn't to dominate the child, but to liberate him', before asking 'What is liberation?' and going on to answer this question with a quotation by early years practitioner Maria Montessori:

*It is not possible to speak of free choice when all kinds of external stimuli attract a child at the same time and, having no will power, he responds to every call .... The child is not free. He is a slave to superficial sensations.*

The parent sets the habits, the child's body and brain mature, the child develops self control and the parent takes a step back while remaining present. An easy formula which is anything but easy to apply!

**Enjoy being your child's slave, your young person's coach and your adult child's friend**

*I can best sum up my own upbringing as one of benign loving neglect and looking back I realise that I meted this out in some measure to my own children. We take it for granted that we mop up and run around after very young children but perhaps 'independence' is an overrated virtue in the early years of nursery and school? I've just re-read notes from Caroline Fraser's presentation in which she recommends 'more parental involvement in the early years as a way of making the journey smoother later'. Wish I'd understood this 30 years ago!*

*A few years ago a pupil stopped playing the piano after her mother tore into her in public for not packing the right music. She was ten! I remember thinking at the time, 'Perhaps mum could*

<sup>6</sup> Sharron Beamer: *The Parent-Child Relationship*. Accessed online at <https://teachsuzukiviolin.com/sharron-beamer-suzuki-violin-teacher/>, January 2018

*pack music' before remembering how little I did to help my children organise themselves. I currently have a 16-year old pupil. He is perfectly capable of packing his music but his dad, who drives him to lessons, takes notes and supports from the sidelines, packs it for him. We joke, 'Has your slave remembered to pack the Mozart?' We all know that it is not that son **can't** pack his own music but dad's action is a way of showing his love during those teenage years when the words 'I love you' don't come easy. The gentle special relationship between father and son is lovely to watch.*

*With my own children I was chauffeur and accompanist but, fighting shy of the 'pushy parent' label, just left them 'to get on with it' in late childhood and adolescence before thankfully reaching that happy state of being my adult children's friend where, to plagiarise the words of Bagehot on the constitutional monarchy, I have earned the right 'to be consulted, to warn and advise' .... and of course to pay!*

## Smile lots, take small steps slowly, build bridges

At the Cambridge course in April 2018 we were privileged to observe the ongoing role of the parent as we watched video recordings of Caroline Fraser working with very young children, older children and teenagers – plus parent, of course. With a very young child, the child's only job was to be the child. Parent and teacher did everything else. We watched filmed footage of a mother as she danced, smiled and nursed her baby while observing the lesson of her young child. Working with a four-year old who can copy but not understand, Caroline gives the homework – final left hand cadence C-E-C of *London Bridge* – to mum who can understand. Mum can take responsibility for remembering and practising the point – a four-year

## Being present is essential if we are to notice the 'big' picture around our child

old can't. We see the same child aged 10. She plays *Musette* by Bach and Caroline tells her, 'You can decide about the dynamics'. Caroline knows that the pupil has the knowledge and experience to make that decision and she gives the pupil the responsibility of writing her dynamic choices in the score. We then watch a 15-year old boy who brings mum to the lesson with him. She doesn't need to be there. The boy has developed important tools for independence, including his reading skills, but it is clear that her smile and quiet presence helps the boy feel appreciated. At the end of the lesson Caroline thanks him, not his mum, for 'coming to the lesson so beautifully prepared'.

.... and finally  
**Remember to take comfort from the things you've done 'right' – your children will remind you of everything you've done 'wrong'!**

*If our adult children have the capacity to love and enjoy life and music, if they continue to develop sensitivity, discipline and endurance, and if they have a 'beautiful heart', then 'somewhere in our youth and motherhood, we must have done something good' (with apologies to Julie Andrews!).*

*Thanks to my parents for making me love music.*

The dedication on the CD cover of a recording made by Caroline Fraser's musician son

*How could I NOT enjoy it?*  
My teenage daughter after attending a concert of Brahms with me

*Teaching music is not my main purpose. I want to make good citizens. If children hear fine music from the day of their birth and learn to play it, they develop sensitivity, discipline and endurance. They get a beautiful heart.*  
Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*

<sup>5</sup> Available online at <https://pianosatnumberfive.wordpress.com>