We'll give it a try and see if she I just want her to do it for fun I had known when my children were young

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 ‘raking’ 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 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 Goodner1

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 Code2 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 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.

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 Point4

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 joined 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 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 phute playing habit had 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!

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

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Balance Point

1 Schinichi Suzuki. Nurtured By Love, Amerion Limited, 1996


4 Edward Kreitman, Teaching from the Balance Point, ed. B. West Springs School of Talent Education, 1998


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Suzuki parents are going against popular cultural norms of winning at all costs and traditionally create a musical environment. Many people’s musical environment is accidental. It is formed by whatever happens to be played at home or encountered from the latest bands and shows. Some of my non-Suzuki pupils hardly sing and most are unaware of the musical heritage of western music. Listening (for more, see my handout for parents ‘We put it in their ears first’[1]) must be directed by the parent when the child is young, as 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, each child and parent get to spend 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 I sometimes 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

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