

Practising with your child

By Jenny Macmillan

What is the secret of developing every child's potential so they each make excellent progress? A great deal of it is down to how children practise at home. I've always been fascinated by the subject of practice as, it seems to me, little progress can be made without good practice habits.

Set up a nurturing environment

Parents are crucial to children's progress. You need to surround your children with music from the earliest possible age by singing with them and playing recordings of good music. Listen daily for two to three hours to recordings of both your Suzuki repertoire and also the best performances of other music, so your children develop a concept of the aesthetic beauty of music. Listen to instrumental music, choral music, orchestral music; by your favourite composers and others, such as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.

Take your children to musical events – children's concerts, musicals, ballets. Try to have as much live music-making in your home as possible. Invite other young musicians and their parents to your home. Each child can perform two or three pieces in an informal concert followed by a tea party.

Take notes during lessons

During lessons, you need to be alert and take careful, detailed notes. Note what the teacher says, but also what the teacher does – for instance putting a hand on your child's back or shoulders to encourage better posture – and do the same at home.

Also listen carefully to the sounds produced at the instrument. Many parents video lessons and watch them again at home. As a bare minimum, record on your mobile vital parts of the lesson so you and your child can hear and see again at home the exact sounds and rhythms, and method of practising recommended by your teacher. *Then practise at home in exactly the same way as it was repeated in the lesson.*

At home, go through the notes you took in the lesson and either rewrite them or use a highlighter pen to identify the pertinent points. Each evening go through your notes and plan what to do at the next practice. Be prepared. In your child's practice you need to be a step ahead of your child, ready to direct your child as to what is to be practised, and being aware of how and why.

You can't work on everything at every practice session. I have a system of dots and lines – a dot means the item needs to be practised; a line through the dot means it has been practised – and I usually put another dot to indicate it should be practised again the next day. As the week progresses, you can see exactly how much everything has been practised – and check that nothing is being neglected.

When to practise

Generally, it is better to have a routine for when practice will be done. I strongly recommend that the bulk of the practice is done first thing in the morning, before leaving the house, when children (and parents) are less tired, there are fewer interruptions, and the routine can be much the same each day of the week. Then a second, shorter, practice can be fitted in each evening.

If children are very tired, their evening practice may consist of just playing through two favourite pieces. On other days, they may be able to spend longer at their instrument. But establish the routine of two practices a day. It is invaluable. It means that a child's newest piece can be touched 14 times a week – practised on seven mornings and just played through once on each of seven evenings. Regular short practice sessions are more effective than fewer longer ones.

How to practise

A good regime is to start with technique (Twinkle variations, scales, exercises) in order to focus your child and get them listening carefully, followed by sight reading (if your child is already reading). Then improve a review piece or two, polish a concert piece, continue with detailed work on the newest piece, and end with playing through (or working on) some more review pieces. A satisfying practice session involves working diligently on some pieces, and then playing one or more well-known pieces, thus offering variety, and ending with an enjoyable play-through.

Children's technique and memory are challenged by learning new pieces. Their musicianship is developed by reviewing old pieces. This is where the Suzuki approach is so successful. But families don't always appreciate this at first. Those children who make the best progress are those who maintain their past repertoire thoroughly.

When in Book 1 I recommend all pieces are played through (separate from being practised) three times a week. Children in Book 2 need to play everything they can play in Book 2 three times a week, and Book 1 twice a week. When playing through, children should not be interrupted – parents should listen from the sidelines and make a mental (or written) note to practise the next day any sections that are a little untidy. Maintain a chart so everyone knows which pieces are to be played, and which have been played. Offer small rewards for completed charts.

During your children's practice, a lively tone of voice, gentle and enthusiastic, can encourage your children in their efforts. Give plenty of praise. Praise effort – praise hard work. Even if the result was not perfect this time, the effort has been made and must be appreciated. In fact, this yet-to-be-successful effort requires even more praise than a successful attempt. Be as specific as possible in your praise.

Give your children as much control as possible over their practice. You can involve them by drawing information out of them, discussing what is to be done, and how and why, questioning them, and guiding the practice accordingly.

You'll have more patience if you set your expectations at a reasonable level. Hope that two notes are played well and, if three are well played, that's a bonus – rather than expecting four notes and getting only three.

Stimulate your children's natural desire to learn. At first, practices need to be made fun; later they need to be made interesting.

Practice strategies

Good practising involves identifying and analysing problems, devising strategies and exercises to overcome the difficulties, and repeating short sections, often slowly (pianists often hands separately) while listening carefully for musical sounds. Strategies can involve changing some aspect of the music. You can vary the dynamics (play the passage softly, then strongly), vary the articulation (play staccato, then legato), vary the speed (play slowly, then fast), or vary the rhythm (dotted rhythms, then evenly). Also consider which Twinkle variation would be the most appropriate to help solve a problem.

Inspired by the 52 tips for improving skills in Daniel Coyle *The Little Book of Talent*, I recommend:

- Play with your eyes closed, or blindfolded, to increase awareness of the sound and feel, and to remove other distractions.
- Mime a passage – play without depressing the piano keys fully, or without blowing or blowing.
- Exaggerate – for instance, play very strongly or very softly, or very spiky staccato.
- Play a passage correctly, then the way you played it before incorrectly, then correctly again to develop awareness of what needs to be changed.
- Each day try to build one perfect chunk – make it 100% consistently correct – this may be just two notes, for instance keeping the thumb tucked under, or a big leap.

Here's a relevant quotation from Schiller:

Only those who have the patience to do simple things perfectly can acquire the skills to do difficult things easily.

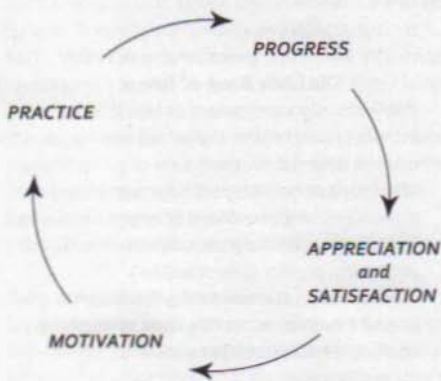
We have to help our children develop that patience.

Suzuki parents

Parents of musically successful children typically have broad interests in music rather than performance expertise. Their children develop a strong sense of themselves as "musical" almost certainly because their early musical achievements are praised by family members. Even though the notion of "talent" has little scientific foundation, belief in one's own talent can be a powerful motivator. Unfortunately, belief that one is not talented can have an opposite negative effect on motivation and effort.

The greatest gifts you can give your children are support and encouragement. All children have the potential to learn to play a musical instrument well, if given the right support. Children need to believe they can learn to play. The relationship between effort and achievement should be emphasised. Children should be rewarded for good work.

My diagram shows the virtuous circle linking practice, progress, satisfaction and motivation:



Learning to play an instrument well requires an ability to question, to be curious, to be intrigued, to look outside the musical and technical issues at the broader view. My book, *Successful Practising*, aims to help parents, students and teachers to question themselves on how they are working, challenge themselves to find more varied and interesting ways of practising and, thereby, make more progress in their ability to play skilfully and expressively.

Studying an instrument involves discovering how to tackle and overcome challenges. It requires self-discipline to dedicate time to practise. Arguably, playing an instrument develops concentration, co-ordination, memory, and mental agility. Improvements in these areas will enhance self-esteem. Above all, patience must be learned. The Zen master, Dogen, replied to a young monk who was anxious that his progress was slow:

The joyfully seeking mind is primary

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Further information can be found on her website www.jennymacmillan.co.uk

*Her book *Successful Practising* (RRP £15) is available through the BSI Music Shop by calling 0203 176 4172*