



Kids + Practice

Making it easy

Let's face it, for all beginner students, learning a musical instrument is a decent challenge. Being a child as well as a beginner brings with it some additional challenges... along with a couple of benefits.

The benefits are that children (especially the younger ones) haven't built up any 'failure patterns' or negative self-beliefs. Their minds are already in the habit of learning, which means the instrument is just one more thing to be absorbed.

The additional challenges are that a child's ability to self-discipline and self-motivate are (to put it mildly) often a bit wanting. They get easily down heartened because their attention is focussed solely on the present moment. They don't keep the bigger picture in mind, and they're not the best planners. Someone older needs to fill these gaps. (Yes, that's you.)

In this eBook we're going to provide you with some tips, tricks and techniques to empower you and empower your child in their practice. It's important to remember that there are two objectives here.

1. For the child to learn to play the instrument.

2. To increase the child's confidence and build their certainty that they can decide to do something, stick to it and achieve it. This second objective is major, as it will apply to anything they decide to do in their lives.

Before we get into the tips, tricks and techniques, we're going to let you in on the one most important factor when it comes to getting your child to practise...

The one secret linchpin to getting your child to practice is... you!

The 'You-Factor' is so important that we've put the specific tips, tricks and techniques in the next section and started with the spotlight on the parent. Why? You are the child's support team and advisor in this musical journey (you don't have to know anything about music for the job so don't fret and please excuse the pun). Most children are not ready to discipline themselves or push through the tough times for the greater achievement beyond, so in this regard you are their manager. You're also their fan club, booking agent and the venue's bouncer as you will see.

So firstly... it's all about you.

1. The Fan Club

Your interest, attention and involvement in your child's practice are key factors in how your child will feel about practising. Sitting down with them for a few minutes at the start and the end of the practice session (if you're unable to spare the full 15 or 20 minutes) and really taking in what they've doing—perhaps even asking a few questions so they can teach you—will be a huge boost for them.

Praise is a no brainer, but it's still one of the most important things you can do. Something that is sometimes missed by parents is the importance of praising the child's efforts, perseverance and determination more than the results. Praising your child for overcoming obstacles and sticking to the practice even when it's 'boring' shows the child that it's not the winning or losing in the short term that matters, but

the way they go about the process. The nurturing of these traits is more important in the long run than the music they produce along the way because pieces will come and go, but determination and perseverance apply to learning any new skill.

2. The Venue's Bouncer

Creating a good, comfortable environment for the child to learn in can be a huge boost to their enthusiasm. Having a space set aside to practice in, where the instrument is easily available and their music books are all in one place tells your child that their practice is important. The space should be as free from distractions as possible – but not somewhere too remote from where you are. Setting up a practice space as far away from you as possible so you don't have to hear the bad notes and endless repetitions may seem like common sense, but doing so sends a message to your child... and it's not an encouraging one.

Being the bouncer also includes a very important, and sometimes overlooked aspect. You are in charge of creating a 'supportive culture' in your home. This means the home must be free from sarcasm about how bad something sounded, or how silly someone looked whilst doing a drill etc. No wise cracks, no laughing at the student's expense. No one saying how easy something is that the student is struggling with, or how much better at it someone else is than the student. These comments can be from other siblings or sometimes even from parents themselves or other adults. This is one of the biggest downers to a child's confidence and *you* are their only line of defense. Instead, a supportive culture where other siblings and adults encourage the student and urge them to keep going must be nurtured.

The classic wise cracks are: "That violin sounds like a cat being strangled." And "Don't give up your day job." It's worth noting that these kinds of comments are particularly prevalent in regards to singing and are one of the main reasons that people don't learn to sing—they're so worried about being teased. The truth is that anyone who can talk, can sing.

3. The Booking Agent

Creating situations where your child can play something they've learnt to others, be it family or friends, is a powerful way of giving the child positive feedback about their efforts. Obviously, you may have to start with people they're comfortable with and then progress from there. Performance is important because it shows the child the other side of learning a musical instrument—that you can give to others through your music. When encouraging your child to do these performances it's good to remind them of what they can give “You'd make Grandma so happy if you'd play her your new piece. You'd make her day.”

4. The Manager

As the manager, you are a leader, a middleman and a disciplinarian when called for. You know that your own habits and attitudes affect your child and you lead by example. You pick your battles, and when you make a stand there's no budging. Firstly, let's handle the 'Do as I say, not as I do' idea... not going to happen! Sorry, but you're going to have to demonstrate good self-discipline by deciding on things and sticking to them. One of the most effective ways to keep a child interested in an instrument is to learn it yourself at the same time and to practice well yourself. That's just one example, but you get the idea.

Next, let's look at your attitudes to make sure they're tweaked and honed to the optimum get-practice-from-child level.

Don't have high expectations—but hold a vision.

This one's pretty straightforward: your expectations translate as pressure to your child. How often do you hear people say that their parents put too much pressure on them to do something, or achieve at something, and it put them off? Their parents had expectations. The trick here is to allow the child to dream (and allow yourself to dream with them), without latching on to a specific outcome or timeframe and thereby creating an expectation. By the way, expectations are different to knowing what the child should do for their own benefit and having a vision for them. Expectations lead to you getting frustrated and feeling disappointed in the child when they don't 'live up

to expectations' and projecting all that negativity onto the child. Having a vision for the child's best interests allows for them to walk a journey in getting there, this means you'll avoid your own disappointments and frustrations because you'll be much more allowing of your child's mistakes, tantrums and disinterest. This is key because you're then able to walk them through these different 'give-up' points and on to success rather than compounding the bad times with your own emotions.

Frustration is not very encouraging.

Wouldn't it be fantastic if, as parents, we could just blast our frustrations with our children, at our children, and they'd take on board the communication without feeling hurt and never repeat the 'corrected behavior' again? The conversation would be something like this:

Parent: "I'VE TOLD YOU BEFORE... YOU HAVE TO PRACTISE EVERY DAY FOR 20 MINUTES! THE TEACHER'S HERE AND YOU HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING... AGAIN!"

9-year-old child: "Ah, yes Mum. I see how that would frustrate you as you only want the best for me, and for me to be really good at the instrument... and to not waste your money. In fact, I can see by the sheer violence of your outburst how passionately you love me. I feel warm inside. I've changed my ways, you won't ever have to say that again."

OK so the vocabulary may not exactly be that of a nine-year-old, but you can see that the above conversation is never going to happen. Children are adept at listening to the emotion behind our communications, not the content. The usual response to that kind of domestic weapon of mass destruction is either:

9-year-old child: "I HAVEN'T HAD ANY TIME BECAUSE I'VE BEEN AT SCHOOL AND GRANNY CAME AROUND YESTERDAY AND YOU SAID I HAD TO TIDY MY ROOM..."

or

9-year-old child: Abashed silence, flushed cheeks and downturned eyes... snuffle... wobbling lip... possibility of imminent tantrum... good to moderate.

So getting frustrated, ordering your child to practise—and rebuking them if they haven't—is obviously not the way forward. That's not to say you don't need to talk to

a child and be 'strict' so that you can help them persevere through tough periods where their interest wanes and bring them through to another fun patch where the interest floods back in. The point is not to come from your own frustration when doing it. This is why we've written this eBook—to give you a few other options before you resort to the good, old fashioned frustration blast technique ;-)

And this leads us to the next managerial cornerstone: Pick your battles.

As the manager for your budding musician, you have to know when to make a stand, and do so without a backwards step (but with love.) For instance: a child who generally practises but who's missing the next door neighbour's birthday party because their allocated practice time is right in the middle of it is probably not one to make a stand with. Any musician will tell you that a party is just as important as practice... at least, any rocker will. On the other hand, a child who was excited to learn at the start, who then hits the reality of the actual learning after a couple of months is probably one to stand with. Seeing them through that tough stage when the honeymoon period is over and they're not yet getting the results that will thrill them is very important. Most children who get past that hump will go on to love the instrument. Our tip is to (within reason) only let a child quit the instrument after they've accomplished something... not while they're on the steep learning curve of something yet unmastered. Children seem to get the words 'difficult' and 'boring' mixed up—often saying 'I don't want to do this piece. It's boring and I hate it!' when they mean 'I'm finding this piece really difficult and I'm a bit worried that I won't be able to get it right.' Still, it's not to disregard your child's communication here because by working together with the teacher you may be able to bring more fun into the learning of the piece—and save the day.

Onwards we flow to the next part – the middleman. Simple and totally natural really. Don't assume that the teacher is hearing the same things from the child that you are; they need to know how your child's going and so building good rapport with the teacher and keeping them in the loop is vital. Often the teachers are doing their best to guide a child through those 'tough times' without the parents really understanding what they're doing... it makes a huge difference to the teacher when the parent is on the same page and everyone's working together.

The last role of the manager is being a source of inspiration. This doesn't have to be a big thing—it can be as simple as reminding your child how much they're improving, or playing them a video of a musician performing on YouTube. The most important part here is that you are the keeper of the vision for them, the bigger picture as to

why they wanted to learn in the first place. When the going gets tough, the vision is going to be needed in large amounts. There are lots of ways to remind your child of the bigger picture, we suggest a few as one of our tips, tricks and techniques. Sometimes just saying it to them verbally is not enough, especially when they're in a tantrum and wanting to give up... perhaps wait an hour or two for the storm to die down and then take them to some live music in the park, or to a friend's house who plays well.

One last idea about inspiring your child is not one you'd normally think of, but it makes sense when you do. When you see or hear a musician that your child really likes, it's really good to point out that the musician had to practice a huge amount to get so good. Perhaps do a bit of research so you can quote the musician, or at least tell your child their story—better still find an interview on YouTube where the artists tells it themselves. This, at first, seems like you're discouraging your child's dreams... but not so. The child will soon click that they can get where they want to go through a little work. They will then be empowered and inspired. It can also help to empower your child to point out a situation where they have already stuck at something and mastered it... they can do it!

10 Top Tips, Tricks and Techniques

Now that you're a super practice-promoting parent, we'll give you a few specific ideas that can make practising easier, more productive and (crucially) more fun.

1. Goal setting

Help your child to come up with a simple goal for each practice session. The teacher will give them goals for the week, and you can ask them to suggest goals for each practice session as well. It's important to involve the child in deciding on the goals though—they should be something your child feels they can achieve, and *want* to achieve. Practicing aimlessly is a recipe for the child feeling that they're not getting

anywhere and getting bored. Having said that, having a single goal that is too big like mastering a whole piece or song, may lead to a feeling of failure fairly swiftly. Have the big goal—like we said earlier, let those dreams go wild—but make sure the child understands that reaching the smaller goals along the way is fantastic and that with every step they get closer to the biggie.

2. Keep the instrument handy

This is another simple one. We want to remove as many obstacles to practice as possible – so having the instrument on display, perhaps on a stand rather than in a case in the cupboard is one less mental hurdle to jump. Having the music books all in one place with a music stand ready to go is also a timesaver—books, especially the one with the piece the child needs to practice, seem to be the most losable items in the house... keep an eye on them or they'll escape with the spare socks.

3. Rise and shine?

Many parents report that morning practice is a lot easier to sell to the child than afternoon or evening practice, when they're already tired and all the good stuff's on TV (or these days, Xbox!) While it may not be practical for everyone to organize pre-school practice sessions, weekend mornings are always available. If you can manage morning practices during the week it's certainly something worth experimenting with.

4. Set a practice time

No matter what time of day you decide to go with, one thing is clear: unless your child bounds up to the instrument every day and can't wait to get their hands on it, you need to be the one setting the practice time.

Setting a particular time of day works well for some. For other families setting a particular 'slot' is better. By slot we mean scheduling the practice to occur after and before certain other activities. For instance, after dinner and before playtime. This way, it won't throw the whole family out if something delays you and the practice 'slot' falls later than normal.

5. Little and often

Since learning a musical instrument is essentially about using repetition to build up mental and motor mastery over a certain pattern, short bursts of practice every day are far more preferable to one or two long practice sessions. The long practice sessions, if not a product of your child's own drive and passion, will also usually end up feeling like a drag and the contemplation of starting the next long, boring practice draaaaaag will be a mountain you'll hear all about!

6. Holistic education

Learning a musical instrument is a pretty dull thing if it's an isolated and one-dimensional affair. One of the top tips in this eBook is to immerse yourself and your child in the wide world of music. Here are a few ideas: Attend a music recital. Go to a sibling's talent quest at school. Find a local band and ask if you can drop by during their practice time. Don't just walk past buskers, pause and let your child take it all in. Watch your favorite artists perform on YouTube. Buy DVDs, CDs and books of children's music (we have a link at the end of this eBook for great sheet music). Go to the house of one of your friends who you know can play an instrument, take your child and ask your friend to play.

There are a million things you can do, and any of them will help to inspire your child and connect the dots for them.

7. Rewards without habits

What we want is to keep children feeling enthusiastic about their practice. Rewards can help with this. Try and avoid getting into bribe territory though. You can achieve this by rewarding your child with a treat every so often after practice, but not always. That way they'll feel great about the practice when rewarded, but will not learn to expect it or start practising simply to get it.

8. The 'Joint-Venture'

Many parents get great results by creating a way for the child to contribute financially to learning. This might be putting some of their birthday, or Christmas money from relatives towards sheet music, music books or an instrument. It might be that their reward for doing certain chores is to be able to take the lessons each week. Or, for older children with jobs, they can actually contribute a portion of the lesson fees each week. Being involved in funding their own learning will put more worth on the activity for the child and result in a youngster being more committed and disciplined.

9. Gearing Up

This one's linked to the use of rewards and the joint-venture idea. A fairly safe way to reward your child for practice is with items that are related to the musical instrument they're learning. This also gives the child a stake in their own 'gear' and musical material—they know they received the tuner because they practiced really well the first month, and the Michael Jackson songbook because they practiced well the previous month and also played a mini concert to their grandparents. This month, if they can master the intro to 'Beat It', a concert in the local park that's been put on by a local band is up for grabs as well as some cool pink guitar picks: 'no time for TV Mum... I need to practise!'

10. 'Gamerize' whenever possible

We've left probably the most powerful tip until last. This technique is used widely in education all around the world because it works. It's also the basis of many of the most successful educational websites on the internet—take 'Mathletics' for example. What you do is find a way to make a game of what the child has to practice. It's that simple.

This works brilliantly with younger children and can turn a fighting, grizzling seven-year-old anti-practice scoundrel into a giggling angel.

Here are a few gamerizing ideas, but basically the list is endless. We would suggest avoiding creating competitive games between your child and another person or child though... nobody likes losing.

i. The time trial

Often your child will have to do something over and over again, with the aim of improving accuracy and speed. It can really engage a child for you to sit down with a stopwatch (or a timer on a smart phone) and time them doing a certain repetition. The game is for them to try and beat their best time. Often, the more you pretend to be on the edge of your seat, the more engaged they become... but be careful not to build them up for a big let-down. The time to end one of these time trials is when your child seems to be making more mistakes than they were earlier. This is usually an indication that their concentration is waning. Your child will almost always shave time off their initial best, and it's great at the end of the session to point this out. It means they won the game, not whether their last time was their best or not.

ii. Keeping score

Another nice game is to allocate points for doing something correctly and points for making certain mistakes. The 'correct' points go to the child and the 'mistake' points get assigned to something inanimate that we're pretending they're up against. It could be anything: a soft toy, a figure in a painting or the tree outside... anything at all, just not a person. Alternatively simply keep track of 'yes' and 'no' points without the imaginary opponent. You can alter the amount of points you're playing for at the start of each 'challenge' so that they child never gets too far behind (or in front) and you can assign the points to highlight certain things that the child is finding hard, or forgetting to concentrate on. For instance, if your child is learning the guitar and they always place a finger wrong on a G chord, attach a point to that very mistake. Point out where they gain and lose points as they play and it won't be long until they fix the mistakes that you highlight. This is one rare instance where children who have played computer games may have a slight edge... you can talk in terms of moving up to a new 'level' of difficulty, or if they lose the plot completely tell them you're going to 'restart the level'. Having said

that, all children cotton on to a game as fast as a chocolate bar in the cupboard, so the latest games console is certainly not a must-have for music students!

iii. Three 'penny' game

This is similar to keeping score. Basically you have three low denomination coins—one pence if you're in the UK, five cents in Australia, one cent in the US, etc.—and you put all three on one side of the child. The game is that they have to complete something, perhaps a part of a piece, the verse of a song or an entire scale, in order to move one of the coins to the other side of them. When they get it wrong, they move a coin back. Only when they have all three coins on the opposite side to where they started is the game over. Traditionally the reward is to keep the coins. Of course you could use anything instead of the coins and reward with whatever you wish.

iv. General silliness

Why be stiff and serious about practice? No reason in the world! Sometimes just being a little silly about it can make all the difference. One example would be getting your child to try playing their instrument with their eyes closed. Another might be practicing whilst pulling a funny face. Anything silly thing like this can turn a serious and stressful experience into a barrel load of fun for you and your child. Fun must always come before results. Why? Fun will make your child stick to the instrument and as long as it remains fun... results will follow. Results without fun = ☹ and ☹ usually leads to quitting.

All that's left to say is... good luck! Armed with the tools you now have, we're confident that you and your child will have a fun and rewarding musical journey ahead.

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