

Don't Make Your Child Hate Practice

by Dr. Linda High

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Parents often become frustrated while attempting to monitor their children's practice. By providing our children with the opportunity to study music, we hope to give them a lifetime of enjoyment and appreciation of music. However, children will develop negative feelings about music if practice time becomes dreaded and quarrelsome for both children and parents. Not only can the love of music be destroyed, but the relationships between parents and children can become seriously damaged.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the creation of a positive and efficient practice period. It is important for children to practice. Practice is necessary to learn the skills and techniques that make performing the music so enjoyable. However, realistic goals must be established and parents' expectations should be compatible with those goals. For example, children who have short attention spans should not be expected to have long practice times. Parents who work full time may find it hard to spend 45 minutes every night working with their children. It is, however, important to practice every day. A short amount of practice time daily, over an extended period, is better than a long period once or twice per week.

Establish a given practice time that is feasible. If both parent and child are morning people, perhaps a regular time immediately following breakfast would be suitable. If a morning time is not desirable, perhaps a time immediately following school or dinner could be selected. Consistency is the key: it should be the same time every day. Conflict can be avoided if the practice time become part of a daily routine. If parents allow their children to miss their daily practice time, it will become difficult to enforce.

The amount of time spent practicing is not important. What is important is the completion of the task at hand. Perhaps the task is to play the right hand of a piece five times without a mistake or to play the top line of the second page three times by memory without a mistake. Clock watching should be avoided. The completion of a given, realistic task is the goal, and the child should not be allowed to proceed to the next activity until the first task is completed. It is important to note here that at times a child may become confused, frustrated and upset with a particular task. If this happens, it may be best to stop, proceed to the next task and return to the frustrating assignment on another day.

Children do need to learn how to correct and perfect difficult parts. This can be done by isolating the difficult section, taking it apart, correcting it, then playing it enough times to be able to play it accurately with ease. Often, when children encounter a difficult passage in a piece of music, they stop and go back to the beginning, returning to the same spot and experiencing the same difficulty without ever correcting it. This can become very frustrating to a child and is not the way to maximize valuable practice time. Therefore, teachers and parents need to encourage children to isolate, take apart and correct difficult sections before proceeding in the music or returning to the beginning of a piece.

Feedback, acknowledgment, and praise are important and necessary to encourage children. Positive feedback on the correctness or incorrectness of a task is a valuable learning tool. Acknowledgment of efforts and accomplishments and praise for a job well done are invaluable motivators. False praise should be avoided because it devalues the truly fine accomplishments. However, It is

important to recognize and acknowledge hard work and effort.

Children need to learn that the pleasurable activities of improving or playing well are their own rewards. The mastery of a piece of music, the beauty or enjoyment of the sound, the work itself are all rewards enough. Practicing or studying music for a piece of candy, a toy or some other reward should seldom be encouraged. If parents feel that some outside motivation is necessary, perhaps a chart giving recognition for accomplishments could be used. Receiving a star on a chart after playing a given task ten times without a mistake could be considered recognition for completion of a task rather than a reward.

Practice time can be quality time together for a parent and child. However, if practice time is still frustrating after implementing the previous suggestions, parents could consider spending only 10-15 minutes of each practice time monitoring their children, to insure accuracy and reinforce learning, especially with new material. Children could then be encouraged to continue practice on their own until they have completed their assigned tasks. Young children, under six, obviously need much supervision, but as children become older they become more competent and self-sufficient. Our goal, alter all, is to develop autonomy in our children and to enable them to experience the joy and beauty of music independently. To this end, children should be encouraged to spend time practicing; practice is necessary to progress. However, all the practice in the world will be to little avail if we cause our children to hate music in the process.