

Some Home Practice Tips for Parents

A Brainstorming Session From "Suzuki Piano Friends," Columbus, Ohio

Be prepared before the home practice session.

Take good notes and/or tape-record the lesson. Most teachers ask that the notes be in a notebook, not just on pieces of paper that can get lost. This way, you can refer to past weeks' notes. This is particularly helpful when reviewing or if you have a second or third child studying the same instrument.

After you have taken notes, or while you are taking notes, set up a practice chart for the week's lesson. That way if you don't cover everything in one day you will know what to hit the next day.

Ask questions if you aren't sure. If you get home and are confused, email the teacher or call at a convenient time when you won't disturb somebody else's lesson.

Ask the teacher to indicate how many repetitions should be done: a child will often accept instructions from a teacher more willingly than from a parent.

If you can't read music, you might want to take a lesson alone to learn how. There are also cardboard keyboards, books, and other things you can buy to help. Even if you are very slow at reading you will be better able to help your child.

One point

A vital component of effective practice for a student of any age is to have to concentrate on only one point at a time. Make sure the student knows what that point is before playing. After the student has played, deal only with that point (although you may give compliments on other points later, or fix other points in a few minutes or the next day).

Watch and listen closely as the teacher hears the student play, and if the teacher has not announced it, try to guess what the one point will be for that passage or piece. If you're not sure, leave a space in

your notes and be sure to ask before the teacher moves the student on to the next task. The success of your practice week depends on knowing what to work on.

Although your teacher may suggest several points to work on, especially as the student advances, only practice one point at a time. After you have worked on that point, then you may cover another.

Listening

Listening teaches much more than just notes, rhythm, and form. It teaches tone quality, articulation, tempo, dynamics, phrasing, mood, and balance between the accompaniment and the melody.

Ask your teacher how far ahead in the repertoire to listen, and of course continued listening to "old" pieces is great! Some people say if they listen to an old piece, they hear so many new things that they think that the recording had changed!

When a student is more advanced, it is fun for them to listen to a recording made by a different artist. Pianists might want to hear Mitsuko Uchida playing Mozart or Andras Schiff playing Bach; violinists, Hilary Hahn playing Bach or Itzhak Perlman playing Kreisler. Your teacher will have suggestions.

Take care of yourself.

If you are tired or sick or stressed, plan a simple no-fail practice the child can do, or ask another person to oversee the practice. (Yes, it might be more of a performance than a practice, but that's a good thing too.)

Consistency

Dr. Suzuki said you should only practice on the days you eat. A daily routine is the easiest way to establish consistency: having a set time is great. If there is a shared custody situation and the other parent is unable to practice with the stu-

dent, at least the listening can be done. If your spouse or another adult needs to take the child to an occasional lesson or share in the home practice, brief them as much as possible and explain the situation to the teacher so she/he can give extra help with note-taking, if necessary.

Know your child.

Know your child and adjust the home lesson to fit him or her.

- Some children are not morning people. If you have to practice in the morning anyway, warm up with something really low-key and easy.
- People learn in different ways. Be aware of your child's strengths and weaknesses. Some kids can play a rhythm but can't clap it, while others learn to play a rhythm best if they clap or say it first.
- Some children need more time to answer questions than others.
- Use age-appropriate images for storytelling. (Little children identify with loving a teddy bear or a kitten rather than romantic love.)
- Tap into your child's particular interests, whether they be video games, animal stories, constructing things, or counting small items.
- Most children love humor as long as it is age appropriate so they "get it."

Length of practicing

Whenever possible, tie the length of practice to a goal rather than to clock-watching. Let the child know ahead of time when the practice will be done. Some students do much better with two short sessions rather than one longer one.

Order of practice

Start with something familiar. Once

reading music has begun, the reading assignment should probably be the next item on the agenda every day for at least the first 100 days to ensure that it gets done. Scales or other technical exercises are best practiced before the working piece. Do the detailed work on the working piece first, then let the student play through the whole piece as "dessert."

Keep a practice record or chart so that you know what has been done and when. Your child will feel most confident if s/he comes to the next lesson having practiced all the assignments fairly recently. It is difficult to demonstrate good work in a lesson if the piece or exercise hasn't been done for four days.

Other people can help.

Most kids enjoy practicing in front of others and are often more co-operative when they have an audience. (One playmate is usually the most that will sit quietly and listen to your child practice.) Make sure the tasks can be

accomplished fairly easily so your student is not embarrassed or intimidated. If you are lucky, the listener will even be interested in learning something!

Immediate family, visiting guests, and paid help such as babysitters or practice coaches can also help. If they know how to play the piano, they can help young pianists polish a piece, duet one hand, or play the accompaniment part for a string or flute student. If they play a string instrument, they can help a pianist by playing the melody or the accompaniment while the pianist plays the other hand, or help a string student polish a piece.

Other Suzuki parents that you can talk to at group class or at concerts can help you get over the humps. Also, if you have internet access, go to www.suzukiassociation.org and click on either "Parents" or "Chat." To provide support, Suzuki parent associations have been established in some areas.

Your teacher can give you help with home practicing. You can make a recording (audio or video) of your

home practice sessions and ask your teacher to listen to some of it and give suggestions.

Go to institutes, workshops, performances, recitals, etc. and talk to the other parents or even to the performers if there is a meet-and-greet reception. Let your child talk to the performers, whether they are adults or other kids. Don't worry if you think the comments or questions won't be the most intelligent. Just make contact! Many famous performers like Hilary Hahn are glad to talk with kids at receptions. Every artist was once a child.

Thoughts on Rewards

When possible, make the music the reward.

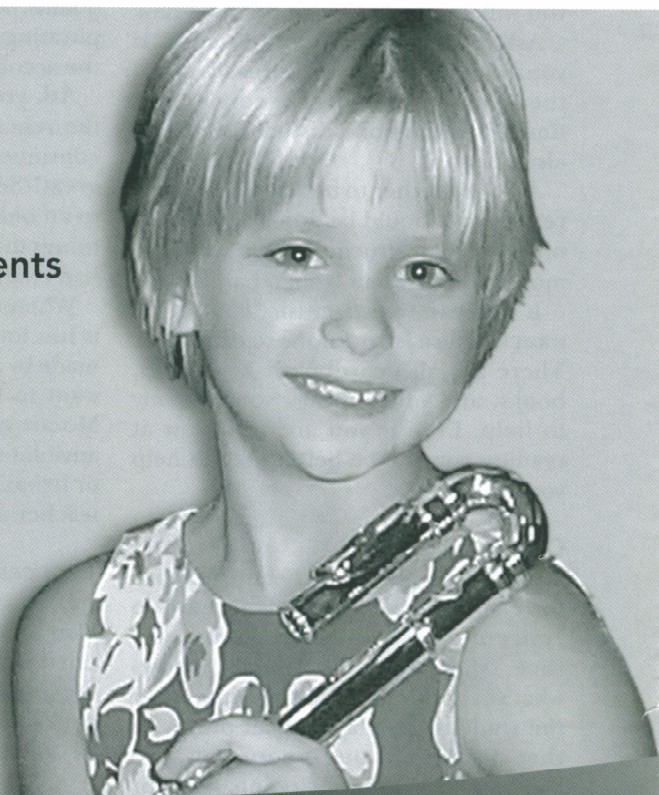
But, if used, extrinsic rewards don't need to cost money. A reward can be a smile, an honest compliment, a pat on the back, a hug. Some of my students like to earn the honor of being called "Duke of Dynamics" or "Princess of Posture." Young children may be delighted to have a simple smiley face or other sign

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drawn with washable fine-line markers on their hands. Or for each step taken towards a goal parent or student could make one fold in a paper airplane or a paper fan or simple origami. For a job well done, a fledgling basketball star may throw a paper wad or soft nerf or koosh ball into a trash can, hoop or drawer. Or there is always the tried and true filling in of a chart with hand-drawn icons or stickers or stars.

Other Practicing Games

Simon says...

Counting games: Move erasers, paper wads, or cotton balls from one side of the keyboard or music stand to the other. (Beware of pennies on the keyboard: they can get stuck between the keys or scratch the piano.)

Card game scramble: For a four-section piece that the student knows pretty well, use the aces, twos, threes, fours and one five and one joker or wild card from a deck of cards. With the faces hidden the students pick one card. If the card is a one, two, three or four they will play the corresponding section. A five allows them to choose their favorite section. A joker or wild card calls for the whole piece. (You can stack the deck if more or less work is needed on a specific section.)

Dice game: Roll a die and then use it in the way that cards are used in "Card game scramble" above, using a roll of six to play the whole piece. This is more random than the card game.

Bother game: For a well-known piece this is good recital preparation. While the student is playing the piece, somebody else turns the lights out, simulates a phone call, talks like an audience member, squirms, chews gum loudly, or finger-walks like a bug walking up the student's back.

Fun break: Keep a water bottle handy, or have the student get up and do stretches, five jumping jacks, or roll over on the floor.

Recording: Make an audio or videotape and send a copy to a relative.

Concerts: Give a concert for a pet, a doll, a teddy bear, or open the windows and play for the flowers or birds (or mosquitos if you're really desperate). Or organize a mini-concert with other student friends.

Silly positions: Once in a while play in a strange position (e.g. pianists playing standing up or even lying down, string players kneeling or lying down). ♪



Suzuki Piano Friends: Front row, left to right; Leta Mason, Carolyn Grahn, Caryl A. Palmer. Back row, left to right; Carol L. Thompson, Merry Bing Pruitt, Maryfrances Kirsh, Melissa Sengstack Robol, Melody Lewis, Sharleen Worsfold. Not pictured: Judy Mains Seurei.

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