

Making Practice Positive

No child, however "gifted" was born with the ability to practice effectively on his or her own initiative. As Suzuki parents and teachers, our task is to foster the desire to practice and the skill of practicing cheerfully and well. The "talent" for practicing is not inherited from "musical" ancestors but rather is developed gradually in an environment of unconditional acceptance and unflagging enthusiasm. Suzuki challenges us: "Where love is deep, much can be accomplished."

STEP ONE: Overcoming Reluctance

Many parents fear reluctance most of all "My child does not want to practice. If I make him do it, will I destroy his love for music?" they ask. Whether or not to practice must be the parent's decision.

Young children are not terribly good yet at making intelligent choices about matters that set their future lives. They have less experience at this than you do. Therefore, they must be taught what is good for them. If you believe that playing an instrument is worthwhile (you must, or you would not have paid for lessons!), you need to take the lead in establishing the healthy habit of daily practice, regardless of what the child appears to want.

Suzuki says to practice only on the days you eat. Daily practice (that's seven days a week; even on lesson day and weekends!) is desirable for two reasons. First, practice then becomes an essential element on each day's routine. Wriggling out of it is not an option. Second, seven day practicing makes anyone's playing noticeably better! More practice leads to prettier sounds, which leads to the desire to practice more. The circle is endless and infinitely rewarding.

STEP TWO: Preventing Procrastination

The two of you have decided to practice, but you find that it takes "forever" to begin. For adults, procrastination is closely tied to fear: fear that we won't do something properly, fear that it will take too long to finish, or fear that it isn't worth doing in the first place. It's probably that children dawdle for the same reasons.

The procrastination problem has three components:

- 1) Fear of Failure: There is no such thing as failure in the Suzuki method if the method is applied properly. First, make certain that you are taking advantage of all aspects of the method, such as doing the recommended amount of listening and attending all group activities. Then, when practicing be careful to proceed in small steps so that success is assured in each attempt. Finally, joyfully recognize each honest effort and be lavish with your praise.

The plan for practice can (and must!) make the child feel successful. Suzuki so often says, "Build ability with a piece you can play." Remember that this is the keystone of the Suzuki method. The largest part of the practice session needs to be devoted to things that are familiar. Familiarity breeds confidence. And confidence eliminates fear.

Begin the practice session with something old. They try to start the new piece while your child still has some energy to devote to it. If the new assignment seems too much or too difficult, stop before frustration sets in. Return immediately to what was last successful. It is important to end every practice session while both of you are still having fun. Practice is a little bit like gambling. In order to win, you must learn to quit while you're ahead. Finish practicing with

something you both know the student can play beautifully. The memory of that beautiful sound will help you feel like practicing again tomorrow.

2) Fear of Forever. Practicing is too often perceived as thirty minutes of eternity. Children are not very adept at measuring time. Or at least they tend to interpret it differently than we do. For example, the same child who sat enraptured for two hours at a violin recital (while Mother squirmed) found the twenty seconds it took to play a single "Twinkle" variation too long to concentrate on keeping his eye on the bow! This paradox is typical of the behavior of the young child. I have no explanation, just some suggestions based upon other observations.

Pay attention to pacing in practice. Keep the practice moving. Children become bored almost instantly if there is too much talking. Keep talking to minimum. Try to do most of your teaching non-verbally: with stroking, cuddling, touching the "forgetful finger" or strengthening the posture. If you must talk, decide what you are going to say while the child is still playing. Breathe before the child stops so that you can interject your comment (expressed in positive terms only, please!) the instant the music has ended. This will maintain the two essential ingredients for successful practice: concentration and enthusiasm.

Keep task varied, as some require more concentration than others. A written plan is good. Ask your teacher to suggest one. Or you and your child can compile a "shopping list" of things to work on before you start. For a change of pace, try Suzuki's "lucky dip" method. Write the names of pieces, or technical tasks, on slips of paper and draw them out of a jar one by one until you have completed them all.

I tend to think that time taken in rewarding successful repetitions is time well spent. A reward will encourage the child to keep going while skill and self-confidence are developed., so that by the tenth (or the 100th , or the 10, 000th!) time, the task has become so easy and the child is having so much fun that the material reward is forgotten in the joy of performing well...And isn't this where we're headed?

Furthermore, increasing the number of repetitions is almost invariably a worthwhile expenditure of practice time, a relatively recent discovery of mine, but something that Suzuki has been saying for years, If I assign three repetitions of something, most children are unlikely to complete the assignment. Once seems enough, and three is just not that much different. If I assign ten repetitions, the child remains unconvinced that such a huge number is even within the realm of possibility -unless I prove that it is time worth spending by investing lesson time in hearing all ten. Then it works. But a strange and wonderful thing happens when I ask for one hundred repetitions. The student is immediately challenged to defy the parent's spoken or unspoken expectation: "He won't do three: therefore he certainly won't do 100." The child rises to the challenge, and is rewarded by significantly better playing - as well as increased self-confidence, the teacher's pleasure, and usually the parent's complete amazement.

Finally, learn to stress the fact that the task is more important than the time taken to accomplish it. Forget the old, standard thirty minute practice period. Do the assignment; quickly, joyfully and well.

3. Fearless Fun?? Whether or not practice is fun often depends on the first two factors: length of practice and the degree of success achieved. Still, conscious effort must be devoted to

finding the fun in practice. Parents and teachers sometimes tend to forget that we are dealing with children.

Sadly, practicing may not yet be its own reward. Indeed, this is probable. And -equally sadly- the child may also fail to be motivated by the parent's approval and praise. But don't despair. This is where outside motivators can be effective.

I use stickers. For each 100 repetitions of an assigned task, the student is allowed to choose a sticker from my special red box. It works beautifully. The children can't wait for the lesson to be over so that they can go home and start practicing. And the ultimate rewards are far greater than just taking home something colorful. In return for the 100 repetitions, the child gains ability and self-esteem. These are lasting and healthy

Is this but a clear case of the end justifying the means? Perhaps. However, I enjoy giving gifts. And my students are learning a lesson that will prepare them for life. After all, life in every society is based upon the assumption that socially acceptable, or "good" behavior will bring acceptance and rewards. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, but we can help implant in our children the faith that life is positive, lovely, and somewhat magical if we first put in the ingredients of hard work and sensitivity to beauty.

I often hear parents say, "I don't want to have to bribe my children." Here I point out the difference between a reward and a bribe. A bribe is offered to induce a person to do something unethical, rewards are given to acknowledge a worthwhile job that has been well done.

No, it is not necessary to go out and buy stickers in order to be good Suzuki parent. I have had equal success with less expense by drawing stars on a piece of scrap paper with a pencil colored pencils are especially good) Another teacher I know draws happy faces for each task completed. She contracts in advance for the number of faces the child desires to earn.

Rewards can be food, i.e. nuts, raisings, pretzels, or sweets. Or you may choose to count "points" toward a special trip: to the zoo, swimming pool, or even grocery shopping or picking up the dry cleaning if it is a privilege in your family for a child to be taken on a special journey with one parent. Remember, though, that motivators must be appropriate to the child and that nothing works forever.

It is vital to keep a sense of fun throughout all your musical activities. Practice is a serious business, but it can be tremendous fun at the same time. Games and even occasional silliness have their place. Some all-time Suzuki favorites are listed below:

- Give a concert for guests, neighbors, stuffed animals, etc.
- Draw silly suggestions out of a hat i.e. play your newest piece with a smile, play "Twinkle " with your eyes closed, barefoot, etc.
- Try role-reversals: The child is the teacher and Mother must play. (We learn some surprising things about our teaching that way.)
- Roll dice and play pieces corresponding to the number thrown (songs in the Suzuki series are numbers)
- Test your ability: can you walk or answer questions while still playing perfectly?

- Tape record a practice session. Don't do it too often, as it takes time and can be discouraging if you're not too careful about what goes on tape, but every once in a while it can be enlightening and refreshing change of pace.
- Make a huge practice chart and post it in a prominent place in the house. Practice is then seen as very important.

Step Three: Eliminating Conflict

We practice every day , but we always end up fighting." First off, determine whether or not both of you agree on the assignment. The parent must take notes in the lesson. Sometimes making a tape recording of lessons helps avoid squabbles during the week. Help the child to remember the lesson and plan the week's practice on the way home from the lesson each week. While the lesson is still fresh in your minds.

Listen to yourself. Is there more talking than playing in each practice session? Are you continually stopping? Are you always critical? Do you tend to discourage your child by mentioning several things that need to be corrected every time you stop?

It is generally best to concentrate on what the teacher has deemed most important. Please notice the other problems, but correct them non-verbally, if you must. Usually it's best to make a mental note of the child's weak points. Once the main teaching point for the week has been successfully tackled, several other problems may disappear on their own. Discuss your concerns with the teacher if they seem to be a continuing pattern, but try not to mention the child's shortcomings in his or her presence.

Corrections can ALWAYS be made using positive, rather than negative language, and must always be preceded by praise, Instead of saying, Your elbows is too high try Good bow hold. Can you lower your elbow, please?

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