

How to Help Your Child Practice at Home

What Practice Is

*Learning how to practice is a different skill altogether
from actually playing the instrument.*

Knowing what practice is and why it's valuable will assist you in helping your child make the most of his time at the instrument. It will also guide you in dealing with the resistance that will happen on occasion, even with the most dedicated child.

Your child will be very frustrated with his inability to carry out the lesson assignment at home the longer he waits between practice sessions because he has forgotten what to do and how to do it. Therefore, daily practice will give your child the most progress for his effort and will keep frustration to a minimum.

Practicing seven days a week is not realistic for every student or every family. The student might like "a day off." If he practices six days a week, his tasks will be well-reinforced and one 48-hour gap will not affect his overall retention significantly. The day after or before the lesson is never a good choice for the vacation day.

Home practice is also a time to experiment. After he completes his assignment, encourage your child to explore. Perhaps he can pick out a tune by ear, play a song he already knows but in a different way, or make up his own song. Playing an old song or two is fun; this is also a good way to reinforce your child's progress and point out that his efforts are bearing fruit: "Do you remember back at Christmas when this song was so hard for you?" Looking ahead in his materials is another productive activity: your child can see how much of the upcoming material he already knows and can challenge himself to figure out some of the rest.

Finally, home practice is a time for the family to participate in the child's music study. This can take the form of "family concerts" after dinner, playing duets with another family member, or participating in the games the teacher assigns (to work on note-reading or counting).

The Secret Weapon

*Parents' thinking the child can practice alone
is the main reason children stop piano study.*

The main reason children want to quit piano is that the parent assumes the child can carry out the assignment by himself. He can't. Frustration, confusion, and despair set in when the child can't carry out the task by himself. And then the parent is upset ("Is my child unable to play the piano? Is he unmusical?") and wonders whether the money and effort being expended is worth it. Don't expect the child to practice on his own! Of course, parents don't deliberately leave the child alone at the piano. It's just something they've never thought to avoid. Now you know the secret! So, be directly involved. On the bench if the child is young. In the room when the child is older. The secret weapon is *YOU* and your direct involvement in your child's home practice!

Help with the Lesson Assignment

Your child's teacher will let you know exactly what you need to do to assist actively in home practice. The teacher may ask you to watch the student's hand position as he plays to make sure he maintains the correct one or may ask you to count out loud for your child. A youngster may have card games or board games or other fun activities to carry out at home with a partner.

With young children, you may have to be involved directly for the entire practice session at first. Even after a long period of study, your help may be needed for most of the practice time. Do not expect your child to carry out his practice entirely by himself until he is about 10 years old. (Yes, piano study is a significant commitment for the family!) With children under that age, plan to sit in the room with the child, even if you are not on the bench with him.

Many children (up through approximately 6th grade) like to have a parent keep them company while they practice. Even if the child doesn't need your sustained participation, he may crave your presence because he's lonely in the piano room all by himself. Don't imply by words or body language that you'd rather be somewhere else. That attitude is a negative. Use your "keeping company time" to read for pleasure, catch up on professional reading, balance the checkbook, or simply relax and enjoy your child's accomplishments. At some point, your child will inform you that you are no longer needed. Usually this is about 7th grade. Ask if your child would like you to sit in the room while he practices. Even if he answers yes initially, soon he will inform you that he'd rather be by himself. This change is almost instantaneous when the child enters junior high.

Divide Practice Time

It is often helpful to divide the practice session into two or more segments, particularly with a young child who is still developing his attention span. Two 15-minute practices--or even three 10-minute sessions--can be more productive than one 30-minute sitting. Divide the material for variety, too. For example, if there are two songs, two games, and a technique exercise, work at one song the first time and the other song at the second practice time, playing a game each session and working on half the technical material.

At Home Immediately After the Lessons

If students (adults as well as children) did the following after each lesson, they would find their progress accelerate rapidly. After you return home, sit down with your child and play through the lesson assignment *one time*. This should consume 10 minutes at most. For each part of the assignment, ask your child to describe what he is supposed to do and why and then have him play it for you. This will acquaint you with what you should be hearing and how you should be hearing it, and your child will know that you are aware of precisely what the teacher has requested. Should there be questions, call the teacher right away for clarification rather than let the child ignore an element of his assignment all week (or worse: do it incorrectly and later have to un-learn!).

Your child reaps several things from this post-lesson review. It is a tangible reminder that you support his efforts and are vitally interested in the content of what he is doing. The most important benefit is that the immediate repetition of the assigned material ensures almost 100%

retention of what the teacher said at the lesson. If you like, count this session as a day's practice, so your child may have "a day off" another time later in the week.

A Consistent Practice Time

Children draw security from routine.

Schoolwork is first priority. If there is a large assignment that evening, there may be no time for practice because schoolwork is most important. After schoolwork comes piano playing, however. When that is complete, then there's time to play outside, talk on the telephone, watch TV, or whatever else they'd like to do. It's important that children know that piano study falls right after schoolwork in the day's hierarchy. If there are daily household chores the child is expected to take care of, these come third. They should understand that some days their homework load and their piano time may preclude most or all of their playtime. Not every day, surely, but sometimes. They should understand and accept this before study begins so they can't plead ignorance when faced with a situation like this. Of course, children may "unwind" by having a snack or changing clothes, but right after that, it's time to hit the books. It is never wise to get sidetracked with a magazine or playing with a friend or watching an afternoon TV show.

At-Home Quiet Zone

It goes without saying that other family members should not be in the piano room during practice time. Nor should they be causing a racket elsewhere in the house. Not only is the noise itself distracting, but your child's curiosity will be piqued by the possibility that something interesting is going on elsewhere and she will be distracted and restless. Most families find that practice time for one child is a perfect homework time (or story time) for another.

Reminders

Sometimes, you may have to remind your child to practice. Occasionally, you'll have to remind more firmly! No matter his level of interest in music study, your child is only human and some days he will want to do something else before piano. Or, skip practice altogether. Take a deep breath. Ask the child to play an old song. Applaud his effort! Take another deep breath, hug your child, and say how proud you are! If things go completely downhill, ask your child just to play some favorite songs for you. Don't worry about the assignment. This keeps him at the piano (for enjoyment!), and gives you relaxation and rejuvenation!

A regular practice time and at-home quiet zone help, as does an obvious interest and commitment from the parent(s), as noted. Remember that young children can't be expected to practice on their own or even remember it's time to do their piano-playing. Some even forget whether they've done it or not!

If you constantly experience trouble inducing your child to practice (tantrums, tears, shouting), something is wrong. Your child may not have thought out the time and effort necessary for learning to play a musical instrument. Or, he may have changed his mind when he discovered it's not like TV: with piano study he is a participant; with TV he is only a spectator. Another possibility is

that he has some other problem which is preventing him from feeling his effort is producing a worthwhile result (a sibling is being a pest during practice time, the other parent is making disparaging remarks about piano study, etc.). Consult the teacher for advice.

Dealing with Rebellion about Piano Playing Time

Short answer: Stay the course! Sometimes it will be difficult, and you'll feel like throwing in the towel. (Enough! The hassle isn't worth it! Go ahead and quit!!) Don't. You're doing the right thing, and your child will thank you forever for providing the instrument, the opportunity to study, and your resolve to teach them responsibility when they want to quit something that isn't easy. Piano study isn't easy. If it were, everyone would be doing it. Your children will thank you, so stay the course when things get rocky. And they will. Remember you're giving your child a gift that can't be taken away and one that will bring a lifetime of joy...even when it seems the direct opposite is true while you're in the process!

copyright 1996, Martha Beth Lewis, Ph.D. from:
<http://www.serve.com/marbeth/consumer.html>