

# Parent “Survival Guide”:

What every parent of a music student needs to know...  
in order to remain sane!



## Parent “Survival Guide”

*Unprepared lessons cost the same as prepared ones,  
but their value is substantially compromised.*

Unless your child is naturally gifted, mastering a musical instrument, sport, or other skill is going to be difficult unless he makes a commitment to practice. But getting him to do that may be one of the biggest power struggles you face as a parent.

Helping your children appreciate the rewards of practicing is essential because it also teaches them important life lessons: commitment, follow-through, and responsibility. It's not about practicing a particular thing; it's about teaching kids that making an effort will make you better at something.

Unlike team sports training, practicing an instrument is typically a solitary experience that requires self-discipline...and the repetition needed to perfect the skill can be downright boring to some. Not to mention the time factor: kids juggle so many activities that they don't want to spend their precious downtime on something they perceive to be more work. Fortunately, there are ways to motivate your children to practice, and even learn to view it as a fun activity.

- ❖ Your piano must be in good working condition. All the keys and pedals must work. Ideally, a piano should be serviced (tuned) once a year. *Please maintain your piano!* It will make a big difference in how much your child enjoys piano. I can recommend a piano technician or you can look in the yellow pages. *Electric keyboards are only acceptable for beginning students. They are not an adequate substitute for students above the beginner level.*
- ❖ Your child must be able to practice in a place that is comfortable (clean and warm) and without distractions. If your piano is in the major "traffic" area of your home then either move it or encourage family members to stay clear during scheduled practice times.
- ❖ Students are expected to practice 5-6 days each week. I encourage each student to take one day off each week from practicing. Daily practice is important for reinforcement of concepts and to avoid cramming just before the lesson, which is never successful. Lessons are designed to achieve goals each week through regular practice. Remember “You get out of it what you put into it.”
- ❖ The **quality** of each practice session definitely outweighs the importance of the quantity of minutes practiced. For example, a student will accomplish more during a shorter, but **distraction-free and focused** practice session, than a student who “practices” for the recommended number of minutes but is constantly being distracted by an outside source or has lost focus and begins to play mindlessly. However, a rough estimate of appropriate lengths of practice time per day is given below:

Beginner ~ 10-20 minutes

Early intermediate ~ 20-30 minutes

Late Intermediate ~ 30-45 minutes

Advanced ~ 45-60 minutes

\*TIP\* Practice is easier and more effective if it is broken into multiple times during the day. Dividing practice time before and after school is a good way to do this for children. Also, taking

short breaks during the practice session allows the mind to rest, since careful practice demands extreme concentration. Sufficient scheduled practice time on a daily basis is the surest guarantee that students will experience consistent progress at the piano.

- ❖ Students are expected to work on their lessons and assignments during scheduled practice times. After lesson work is done students may improvise, "play around," or sight read new music on the piano. I encourage this type of creative exploration but I feel that it should be done within the discipline of learning their lesson material. It would be normal for *advanced* students to not play each assigned piece every day. Generally, a student might work on 1/2 to 1/3 of the work assigned on a given day. Or, if a student is working on scales he might do half of them each practice.
- ❖ Parental support is an extremely important factor in musical training for children. Parents are encouraged to attend lessons at any time. If a child is a beginner, it is recommended that parents participate in practice time. Remember that some children experience a feeling of isolation when practicing piano and lose motivation if no one is nearby to listen to the practicing. Parents who provide encouragement will create opportunities for their children to both excel and love music!

**Important note:** Sometime during the course of taking piano lessons, your child may say something like, "I don't want to practice," or "I'm too tired to go to piano lessons," or "I don't want to go- I want to play with my friends," "I want to quit," etc... Just be aware that your child's interest will probably not be consistent; but to be successful, you will need to be consistent in your encouragement and commitment to music instruction. In most cases, simply acknowledge your child's comments, but then go on with your normal routine just as you would if you heard the comment, "I don't want to brush my teeth," "I don't want to stop playing with my toys," or "I don't want to go to bed."

### Things to Remember

- Piano practice should take the same priority as homework.
- Five days of practice per week should be considered a minimum.
- Younger students are usually more successful and focused with two shorter practice sessions each day.
- The quality of practice and the achievement of goals are **ALWAYS** more important than the number of minutes spent at the piano!
- Parental interest/involvement motivates!

## Shared Responsibility

Parents, the student, and the teacher are like a three-legged chair. Together, we can maintain the delicate balance needed for musical success.

### Parent Responsibilities

The parent can assist by requiring daily practice before play time, and by giving encouragement and praise for their child's good efforts. Bringing the student on time to the lesson, purchasing the required materials, and playing classical music in the home are all helpful for the child's growth.

- ❖ **Support and motivate your child.** Your enthusiasm and commitment to this endeavor is crucial to your child's success. Let your child know that you love to hear them play the piano. Celebrate their successes whether it is a good recital performance or mastering the next piece in the book. Be generous with your praise and encouragement. Find places for them to perform – for relatives and friends, at your place of worship, at school. Be proud of their accomplishments large and small.
- ❖ **Communicate with the teacher.** Let the teacher know when things are going well and when they are not.
- ❖ **Help your child find time to practice.** Spend time at home. Limit your child's activities. Make music a priority. Create a quiet, undisturbed place for practice.
- ❖ **Supervise practice.** Parents are encouraged to sit with their child to help with the details of the practice assignment if they can create a positive experience for both themselves and the child. For elementary students, this means sitting with them during their daily practice to help them stay on task and follow written directions. Older students need you to periodically check on their progress and listen to their playing.
- ❖ **Observe lessons** occasionally so you can see and hear what the expectations are for your child.
- ❖ **Provide a quality instrument** – a piano with good action, a pleasing tone, and correct pitch. Tune the piano at least once a year.
- ❖ **Attend concerts and listen to classical music** with your child. Attend a concert once a month. Turn the radio to classical music.

### Student Responsibilities

The student must practice daily with an attentive desire to improve at each session, taking responsibility for his effort and time invested. Students are responsible to be prepared for and actively participate in each lesson and to communicate honestly with the teacher.

- ❖ **Practice intelligently.** Follow the instructions your teacher discusses at your lesson. Practice the whole assignment ~ not just your favorite piece.
- ❖ **Use a pencil.** Do your activity or theory book assignments, write in fingerings and dynamics, and make notes in your music or notebook.

- ❖ **Use the metronome.**
- ❖ **Keep your fingernails short.**
- ❖ **Bring all your music** to the lesson. This is your responsibility, not your parents'. They don't always know which books you need.
- ❖ **Come to lessons with a positive attitude.** A positive attitude will make every challenge easier to overcome. Try your hardest at each lesson ~ attempting is often more important than succeeding.
- ❖ **Ask questions** if you're not sure about something. If you don't understand, it's my fault, not yours. It's my job to teach you in a way you understand.
- ❖ **Share your music** with your family and friends, at your place of worship, at school, and anywhere else you can think of.

### Teacher Responsibilities

An important motivator for the students is the teacher's example as a musician. Teachers must continually develop their skills with continuing education in teaching and performing. The teacher is responsible to express clear expectations for students; to help them reach their goals; to design and organize effective learning activities; to provide information and give direction for students to find further information; and to accept, consider, and respond to students' learning needs throughout the year.

- ❖ **Be knowledgeable** about technique, literature, music theory, history, and pedagogy.
- ❖ **Continue to learn and explore new ideas** on teaching and performance.
- ❖ **Motivate students** to give their best each day.
- ❖ **Plan a unique curriculum** for each student based on his or her learning style, ability, and personality.
- ❖ **Be enthusiastic** about making music.
- ❖ **Guide each student to musical independence.** Help each student develop the necessary skills to become an independent learner.