

# How to Get Kids to Practice

The fall semester has arrived, and with it new schedules, new activities, and new priorities. It is important to meet the new season with a resolve to make music a part of your child's life--to make regular practice a routine meshed in with all your other daily routines.

Indeed, the success I have enjoyed with my students here in Glennallen, is largely due to my ability to teach kids how to practice (performing endless repetitions of simple actions, which lead, step-by-step, to mastery). It can be seen, from this success, that practice is a big subject; there can be no doubt that success with music depends on a strict physical discipline, the adherence to which is directly responsible for the acquisition of the co-ordinative skills, which then lead to musical sensitivities.

But the issue here is not what to do once the instrument is out of the case, the issue here is, "How do I get the stupid CASE OPEN?!" Believe me, opening a violin case can be one of the hugest, most laborious efforts in the world, (playing the violin is hard work!), and I have trembled before its immensity many times. What I know, that the kids don't know, is what awaits them at the end of the line: I know that playing a piece of music elegantly, with musical intention, can be one of the most positively transforming experiences anyone can have. Even in my state of semi-retirement, every once in awhile I feel the need to work my butt off for six weeks and put on a show, because every time I make myself do that, I come out of it a stronger, wiser man.

So, we know the end of music is good, but we sometimes fail to grasp what is necessary to reach that end; there is a lot of space between here and there, and we need to move through that space step-by-step. It is the same number of steps for everybody, but everybody's aptitude for working through the steps is not the same; also, the TIMING of the passage up those steps, relative to each other, is different in every person. Not only is everybody's bio-rhythm different, everybody's learning curves for various skills is also different; one student might spend months just going over the very basic stuff (like the staff lines, or how to count quarter notes) and then suddenly take off like a rocket. I've seen other kids start strong and then stall right in front of a quantum leap into the next level. I recently spent at least four months with a student on a really dumb little piece, going over and over and over and over and over these few simple moves; I was beginning to doubt the kid, but suddenly a door opened in the mind and many stray bits all fell into place, and the student shot up like a geyser. You never know when that is going to happen, but

it always happens. If the discipline is enforced long enough to make it possible for the student to get that first taste of recital success--that taste that is sweet in the mouth and warm in the heart--practice becomes a non-issue. Once the student realizes what music gives back it becomes a cherished commodity.

I recently asked a girl if she liked to practice.

"No," she said.

"Then why do you do it?"

"Cause I wanna be GOOD!"

You can't beat that answer; that kid has learned what the work leads to. But how do we implant that vision of what it is to be GOOD in the imagination of a nine-year-old? Nobody, of any age, does anything unless they can see something in it for themselves; let's face it, even the most altruistic motives in the world still include elements of self-serving self interest. So how do we get kids to see what is in it for them, so they can meet the challenge, do what they have to do, and figure that the end result is worth it?

The first two years are the hardest. The second year can be almost harder than the first: during the first year everything is new and interesting and vast, but by the second year we are starting to come into sharper focus, and the effort required is more not less. Most of my first year I hardly practiced at all, largely because I didn't get how; it was frustrating when a parent suggested I get out the violin and practice, because I really didn't know what I was supposed to do. This is how a lot of friction is generated between children and parents--parents who want to do the right thing by encouraging their children to practice, but who don't want to put up with all the fussing that attends getting a kid to do something s/he doesn't want to do. If this dysfunction is not repaired by the end of the first year, the chances of the second year going well are slim. On the other hand, I have had many students who skated along doing practically nothing the first year, but who suddenly got good enough to start reaping some of those mythical musical rewards, and sailed into the discipline with a will. I have rarely had a student who made it through the first two years, who didn't then continue on with an ever more serious attitude. Music gives so much to a junior higher that a grade schooler can't imagine.

So instead of long-range success, which we as adults can see, we need to bait the practice hook with something that appears utterly tangible to a child: we have to implant in the student's mind an appetite for a series of short-range successes. Young children can see only so far into the future, so we can't ask them to work for a reward that is years away--it must be closer than that--but, if the

students can be made to imagine a coveted close-range reward that they can work for and earn, then it shouldn't be that hard to motivate the proper preparation. They know what they are supposed to do, they just need someone to help them develop the habit.

It must be made clear, to the beginning practitioner, that s/he is forming a habit that is to become a core element of the weekly schedule. Nobody fusses about getting up and going to school--there is no choice--so neither should there be any choice about practicing. When a student makes the musical discipline a part of his/her life there is no point in doing it lame--the resolution to stick to a schedule should be steadfast. That is why a regular practice time is best. Most kids have schedules that have holes of unstructured time in them. I always shy away from practice times right directly after school, because I know kids usually want to eat something, need to rest, etc., and that is good, I guess. But TV fests, or outside playing with friends fests, can turn into big time drains with nothing to show for themselves but the transitory fun.

Practice should take place BEFORE homework. Parents who insist on homework before practice are making two mistakes:

- 1.) First, there is the inescapable implication that homework for the public school teacher is more important than the homework for a music teacher--that the public school homework MUST be done but the music homework, depending on the time of night, MAY NOT be done. Hence, when a child sits down to homework, looking forward to practicing afterwards, the homework could drag on until bedtime. Not only is this unnecessary, it flies in the face of the second fact about practice vs. homework.

- 2.) It is well known that music is largely a right brain function, and that the majority of learning in school is left brain. Homework is also majorly left brain. So why work on left brain stuff all day, then come home and do more left brain stuff? If you practice first, you work your right brain, which is starved for stimulation, and give the left brain a rest. This makes the practicing better, and the homework, (done with a refreshed left brain), go faster.

Sometimes the family works against practice because often practicing takes place in trafficked areas of the house, or unnecessary surprise scheduling changes occur. The commitment to respect practice time must be shared by everyone in the household. Everybody in the family should know when Esau's practice time is, and should, as much as possible, not interfere with it. If Esau is supposed to be practicing, and Momma interrupts him to take out the garbage that he forgot to take out earlier, then the practice routine is compromised, not to mention that the

garbage discipline is also compromised.

Now, I have heard many, many horror stories about the temper tantrums children can throw when they are urged by their parents to practice and they don't want to. I know what little jerks kids can be, and I understand parents' reluctance to bring something into their home that seems to carry with it a potential discharge of unwelcome negativity. I have seen many parents throw in the towel on students who were just too much trouble. I'm not saying that everybody ought to be a musician, but I have never had a student for whom music didn't do some good, and for whom it could have done more, if they hadn't quit. I just wish I could make these bratty kids, and these frustrated parents see as far down the road as I can see.

It takes a huge amount of effort to form habits, and good habits can disappear at any time, in the twinkling of an eye. The resolve must be of a permanent nature. But remember that the idea of permanence is different to a child than to an adult; to a child, a permanent duration might be no more than two weeks. This is why we need to make short-range goals a part of the overview of music lessons.

The recitals are the best invention I know of to get kids to take their practicing seriously. I discourage rural informality, and encourage the ritualization of performance presentations, largely because I want to make the kids think they are involved in a big deal. When people show up to a concert in jeans and a tee shirt, they are de-solemnizing what should be a very sacred event. Big audiences help too, because more people make more applause.

But the recitals are not the only musical contexts in which a student may be influenced by the attendance of others: the ensemble rehearsals are also a place where peer success encourages individuals to excel. I have seen practice routine difficulties completely resolved by a students' incorporation into a group--the weekly challenge of keeping up with the other kids, has inspired disciplined practice from some of the most, apparently, hopeless cases.

Now, I have not waved a magic wand in this article--the most constructive thing I've said is, "Just decide to do it, then do it." You say, "Well duh!" and I say, "Did you really think that there was some secret to getting kids to practice that nobody has ever thought of before?" I have offered the idea of practice before homework, having a regular, ironclad-scheduled time, and making short-range goals for short-range rewards, ideas which, you won't believe it, a lot of people never thought of. But, basically, this article was written more as a pep talk than an instruction sheet. I want to say that people working together for everybody's good is quality I look forward to in heaven, and would like enjoy a bit here in heaven on earth.

Music is an art, suffused with imaginative reality--unsequential, intuitive insight. Unfortunately, this magical quality tends to make people think of music as an unstructured, irrational activity--it isn't. Perhaps the spiritual dimension is, but the physical training is much more like a science: if a program of practice is established, and certain routines are performed many times, on a regular basis, success can be absolutely assured. If the muscles and nervous system are trained over time, they learn to obey the will, and become permanently sensitized; but if you can't prioritize music so that it becomes a permanent, positive fixture in your child's schedule, by somewhere into the second year, then you are throwing your money away on music lesson.

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