Student and parent best practices

Learning music and playing an instrument are a crucial part of an individual’s development and can be an extremely rewarding activity throughout one’s life. However, like the most rewarding things in life learning to play an instrument is a challenging endeavor, especially for children. It is crucial to remember that children usually glean their response to activities based on how those closest to them act. Below are listed a few best practices to help your child learn to play an instrument.

Good Parent Practices:

* **Schedule:** Each day, you as the parent need to sit down with your student to walk through their practice with them. Students are usually very young when they start and as such, they do not have the skills to schedule time to practice or even know how to practice. If you as the parent, however, make a point of exemplifying how a student should take time out of their day to do this activity they will generally follow. Unfortunately, it is not enough to tell the child to practice one needs to exemplify it. Children are developing their cognitive abilities at this time so saying things to them does not hold the same wait as sitting down and showing them. Actions speak louder than words.
* **Listening:** Encourage students to listen either actively or passively to the Suzuki book or piece they are currently working on. At A Musician Is… we use the Suzuki technique as a means of teaching students to the best of our capability. As Such, students will not read music for quite some time and thus they will need to be able to source their memory for the way a piece is played. The reason we do this is because students have a great deal to focus on while learning to play. They will be preoccupied with everything from posture, bow grip, left hand structure, their feet position, their knee position, their head position, the bow hair being flat etc. it is a lot for anyone to keep track of, let alone asking them to decipher a completely different language with note reading. We find that asking them to focus on all those things is more important because those things directly affect the student’s quality of sound. Reading music will come in time just like reading in the student’s primary language came after the student learned to speak.
* **Positive attitude:** It is not only important to exemplify taking time out of one’s day, but it is also important to show them it is not a chore to practice. It is an engaging and productive activity you get to undertake together. At times it will be difficult but if we carefully frame our language children will be drawn to tackling the challenge rather than pulling away from it. Be aware when children first come across something very difficult, they will often pull away from the activity and assert they’ve “lost interest.” This is not necessarily the case. They are just trying to avoid the discomfort of learning something new. Practice at this point could be difficult for both the parent and child but it is critical at this point to encourage the student through the difficulty and not allow them to run from the challenge.
* **Patience**: Children do not have the same physical capabilities as adults. All parents know this to be true but sometimes it can get lost when we are trying to complete a task with the child. During lessons and practice a student is literally developing new neural pathways. They are growing new brain connections. This process takes time and can be very frustrating for the child and for the individual helping them. The best way to deal with this is to learn how to find humor in our mistakes. We want the child to realize they’ve made a mistake, but we also want to have a lighthearted attitude toward them. For instance, a student plays a note incorrect; “oops ya hit that note again. That’s ok we can always just try again. No damage done.”
* **Behavior During Lessons**: All parents are required to attend a student’s lessons. This is because two minds are better than one. Many of the activities that we will go over in lessons are completely new. Children have a shorter attention span and will often be overwhelmed in their first few lessons. It will require many repetitions for a student to remember things. This goes much smoother and faster with a parents help reaffirming what the teacher has asserted.

Practical Application:

* **Schedule:** 
  + Same reoccurring time each day. Make it part of your morning or evening routine.
  + Set a timer to alert you when its time to practice.
  + Set an alarm to alert you that practice time is over.
  + Some students do well with splitting their practice time up. I.e. 10min in the morning and 10min at night.
* **Listening:**
  + Turn on the Suzuki recordings while in the car with you students.
  + Play the recordings while the student gets ready in the morning.
  + Play the recordings while the students is going to bed.
  + Play the recordings while the student is doing homework.
* **Positive Attitude:**
  + Tone of voice matters. Children are more inclined to be interested in higher pitched tones and tend to respond more positively to those tones. The younger they are the more this is true.
  + Do not complain about having to practice with your child. Children are wonderful mimics if you say you don’t have time, they will infer they must not have time either.
  + Make sure and talk through issues with your child. If the student makes a bad sound have a conversation about why. Some students will just say it happened because they “suck” at playing, we need to steer them away from this thought process. It is not true, and it is unhelpful. Instead, have them say exactly what went wrong i.e., pushing too hard with bow, not having the bow straight, or having the fingers in the wrong place. Then ask the student how we fix it i.e., let’s try not pushing so hard this time.
    - Doing this helps a student realize it’s not personal it’s just a problem that needs to be solved. This creates more of a growth mindset.
* **Patience:**
  + When you or the student become frustrated put the instrument down and walk away. After a few minutes come back and try again.
  + Take deep breaths and try not to instantly react. When something happens take a moment think about what happened, why it happened. Then calmly walk your student through that process.
* **Behavior During Lessons:**
  + Bring a little notebook and take notes about the students’ activities during the lesson and their homework.
  + Take notes on your phone.
  + Do not play on your phone or text during class. This undermines the importance of the students’ lessons for the student.
  + Allow the teacher to guide the lesson. We all want to help our children but sometimes parents can make students more nervous if they become to vocal in lessons.

**Age Differences:**

Many of the practice devices discussed here do change as the child gets older. However, even teenagers will largely take their lead from your behaviors. As the child grows if you have established good practice with them to start you can gradually start to step back and require them to take on more responsibility for their actions during practice. Everyone once in a while they may need you to step back in to push them back on the right track.