

Some Advice for Parents about Practicing

Learning to practise with your child is as much about parenting as it is about learning to play an instrument. It is about problem-solving, self-discipline, flexibility, empathy, trust, patience, creativity, and above all, self-esteem. We all struggle to balance these qualities in our parenting styles in order to raise our children to be “noble human beings”, in the words of Dr. Suzuki. I have suggested some further resources at the end of this document, since much of what I have here is merely “condensed” from my own reading. I find that I need to refer to these books from time to time myself when I am in need of inspiration or reassurance. I hope you find these ideas to be helpful as “jumping-off points” for your own personal growth as a Suzuki parent.

1. Practice is not negotiable. The child should practise every day. Practising needs to become part of the child’s daily routine like eating breakfast and brushing teeth. (Suzuki said, “Practise only on the days that you eat”). Pick a regular time of the day that suits your family and your child and **be consistent**. Stick to the practice time. Morning is best for most young children. Some work best in short sessions at several set times of the day. Teenagers may need more flexibility, but they are not experts with time management, despite their great need for independence, so be cautious about handing them the entire responsibility of setting their practice time (How many meals do you let them skip?)
2. Organize your tools. Keep notebooks, music books, instrument and other materials (music stand, cd, pencils, stickers, practice charts) all in the same place, **all** the time.
3. Don’t be in a hurry. Rid yourself of other cares for the session (including the telephone!) and focus on the fact that children don’t deal with life at an adult pace. It’s not “quality” time if you’re multi-tasking.
4. Quality time is better than a lot of time. Beginning parents often make practices too long. Decide what point is to be accomplished and when it is done, stop and give the child a hug.
5. Take tiny bits and master them. Individual elements or short phrases can be practiced in isolation. The ability to separate a piece of music into little chunks must start at an early age (just like solving bigger problems). If you always start at the beginning, you will never master the ending, and will always stumble in the middle.
6. Concentrate on one thing at a time. When working intensively on bow hold, don’t fuss about the left fingers not being exactly on the tapes. Once the bow hold is established, it is time to focus more on intonation.
7. Develop your language skills as a parent so that you can be clear and gentle, but firm. You have the right to set limits; there can still be flexibility within these parameters. You can make a demand without it being an ultimatum. Learn to ask questions that will not elicit

a straight “yes” or “no” answer. This skill will allow you to present your child with reasonable choices (such as which piece to work on next), which give him/her a sense of some control over the practice session.

8. Praise the child’s efforts, no matter how much goes wrong! Look for something positive in everything they play and tell them what you saw or heard that was good. (“I really liked the way you...”) Self-esteem is an incredible motivator. Find what’s working, and get them to repeat it, rather than criticizing what isn’t right.

9. Do not expect instant results. This is particularly challenging for today’s children, who are used to having things happen quickly and easily. This is why it is important to continue to review pieces that have already been learned; the material “settles” and the child gains confidence and facility with it. It gets easier, as long as you are consistently reinforcing the skills that have already been learned.

10. Follow the teacher’s instructions if you expect the child to follow yours. If the teacher wants the child to play a difficult passage 20 times a day, do your best to make sure your child does so –correctly. If you need instructions clarified, ask the teacher. If the child disputes your lesson notes (the teacher’s instructions), bring a cassette tape and we can record the lesson.

12. Don’t compare. Children grow and learn at different rates and enjoy different activities. Learning may follow a consistent path, but the children in your child’s group class, for example, may be at different places on that path. Help your child with each small step and enjoy it.

13. Know when to step back and let the child figure things out for himself (“Don’t just do something, stand there”) –and congratulate him when he does. This can be linked to point #3, because grown-ups tend to be in a hurry and just want to get the job done. We have to remember that ultimately, if we want the child to learn to solve problems for himself, we have to avoid providing him the answers whenever he asks. Sometimes, a child may seem “stuck”, but your acknowledgement of his struggle is actually more important than your offering advice.

14. Develop the skill of acknowledging feelings. Neither you nor your child can control how he feels, but you can help him learn to control how he behaves (what he does), which, in turn, will help him to learn to manage his feelings and work through them.

15. Practising should be a special time for you and your child. Find ways to make it pleasant, rewarding, and fun while getting the job done. Use dice or cards to determine how many repetitions to do. Reverse roles and let your child be the parent. Talk to the child’s fingers (arms, hands). Put stickers on the practice chart. With older children, give them the responsibility of assessing the quality of their practice. They know what they need to work

on, but they may need help to set reasonable goals and acknowledge whether they achieved them.

Practising doesn't have to be fun and games all the time. We aren't all like Mary Poppins! Sometimes just a little variety is needed –either in the order of things to be practised, or the focal point of a certain activity. Sometimes you need “survival strategies” like doing something silly in the middle of a practice session or scheduling “one minute of whining” after the first two tasks on a really difficult day. Do what you can on the “low” days; but don't give up or give in to a child who says they just don't want to practise today. (If you're like me, you would rather buy “convenience foods” when you're short on time, rather than allow your child to skip a meal.)

FURTHER SUGGESTED READING:

Most of the following sources can be purchased through **Remenyi House of Music** (273 Bloor St. W., 1-800-667-6925, www.remenyi.com; or from **the soundpost**, 93 Grenville St, Toronto, 1-800-363-1512, info@thesoundpost.com). The more general parenting books are available at local book stores. All prices are approximate. I have most of these books myself. You are welcome to borrow one book at a time for up to two weeks (sign my “lending library” book).

If you have not read Shinichi Suzuki's [Nurtured by Love](#), or its companion book, [Ability Development From Age Zero](#), I strongly recommend that these be your starting points. Many Suzuki teachers will not permit children to begin lessons until the parents have read these books or taken a course based on them. They are the foundation on which my teaching practice is based.

[Helping Parents Practice; Ideas for Making it Easier](#), by Edmund Sprunger. (275 pp.) Can be ordered directly through **yespublishing.com** for around \$25.

[How to Get Your Child to Practice... Without Resorting to Violence](#), by C. Richards. (67 pp) \$15

[To Learn with Love, a Companion for Suzuki Parents](#), by William & Constance Starr (248 pp) \$14

[How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk](#), by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish(280 pp) \$20

[Kids Are worth It!](#), by Barbara Coloroso (252 pp) \$15

[Love, Limits, and Consequences](#), by Teri Degler & Yvonne Kason (300 pp) \$25

No More Misbehavin': 38 Difficult Behaviors and How to Stop Them, by Michelle Borba. (330 pp) \$22

Boys and Girls Learn Differently, by Michael Gurian. (340 pp) \$22

Stage Fright: Its Causes and Cures, by Kato Havas (134 pp) \$45