

## How to Make Practicing Fun for Your Child

*Written for New Mozart School of Music*

Practicing music takes place in a complex context of expectations, consequences, state of mind, and more. No one is in a better position to influence this context—for better or worse—that the parent of a young musician.

There are several ways to help make practicing fun and rewarding for your children:

**1. First, do no harm.** This should be the first principle in the mind of the parent of a practicing child. Each of the following tips has an opposite that can turn the piano bench into a dentist's chair.

**2. Create a home in which music is a treasured member of the family.** Have music playing often around the house. Make sure there's a good mix—jazz standards, solo guitar, Javanese gamelan, Chopin preludes, string quartets, madrigals and Motown. Practicing music in a home filled with music gives a child a sense of *adding* to the conversation, of helping to create something that is already welcome and familiar.

**3. Create a welcoming practice environment.** Ensure that the practice area is illuminated with warm and indirect lighting and free of such visual messes as tottering piles of paper. Avoid isolating the practitioner. Well-meaning parents often create a separate practice space far removed from family activity—but shutting the child off can make practice time feel like banishment. The distractions of normal family life are more than compensated for by the emotional connection and the ability to offer regular praise and encouragement to a child who practices in the midst of it all.

**4. Focus on effort and achievement will follow.** Make it clear that your love is not dependent on outcomes. A child who is praised for “sticking with it” is far more likely to do so (and to therefore achieve) than one whose shortcomings are made the focus of parental attention. “I’m so proud to hear you staying with that tricky passage! Maybe focusing on those last three notes for a minute will get it solved” puts the correction in the context of a recognized positive effort, and the child will more confidently and effectively tackle the problem.

**5. Transition with care!** A child who is removed from a pleasurable activity with “Get going on that piano!” is far more likely to see practice as an intrusion. Give a little warning (“Ten minutes until practice time!”), or better yet, put practice time after a less desirable but necessary activity. If a child is interrupted from cleaning his room or doing homework in order to practice, practicing becomes a welcome relief.

**6. Allow the child a voice in planning the practice session.** Sit down for the first two minutes of practice to ask, “How would you like to approach this today?” Gently nudge

the plan in the direction it needs to go without sacrificing the child's involvement in the order and timing of things.

**7. Praise like mad!** We all work best when our self-confidence is confirmed from the outside. Listen attentively as your child practices. Praise every success—especially in the early years—remembering that *persistence is as important as achievement*. You don't have to praise poor work—kids see right through that, anyway. In time, a child's confidence will grow to the point that you can taper off the frequency, but never think your child is too old to need or want your praise.

**8. Switch roles.** Play your child's lesson yourself. Ask her to be the teacher. Throw in a few obvious errors. Drop the wrists, start at the wrong finger position, scramble the dynamics—and watch as she gleefully corrects you.

**9. Offer rewards for small, measurable achievements.** Again, motivation should ideally come from within. But a little carrot now and then is a perfectly acceptable way to provide short-term goals. Stickers, privileges, or a popcorn snack can do the trick. Just be careful not to make it the entire point.

**10. Arrange performance opportunities with supportive audiences.** Practice is always more meaningful when it leads to something concrete. Arrange mini-recitals for friends, relatives and neighbors to keep short-term goals in mind.

**11. Invite demonstrations of bad practice.** Invite your child to play a piece horribly—bad bow position, bad posture, reverse dynamics, bad intonation, everything they can come up with. They'll have a ball, learning in the process what *not* to do when they want to play well.

**12. Keep the amount of practice time flexible,** especially in the early years. Watch carefully for signs of fatigue or disinterest in the very young practicer, then say, "You know what—that's about all we have time for today." Their ability to concentrate will gradually increase, and they will avoid learning to equate practice with boredom and misery.