

How to Help Your Child Practice

By Eleanor Gummer, M.Mus, B.Mus, FTCL, LTCL, ARCT
CEO, One Eye Publications

Practicing is important in order to progress and for music to be an enjoyable experience. Unlike many activities, such as swimming, regular daily practicing is essential to move forward. When you take swimming lessons, you don't need your own pool in which to practice, however the more time you spend swimming, the greater your progress.

The study of music involves more than just muscle coordination. Fine motor skills are developed as well as eye-hand coordination. In addition, reading music is like reading any other language - the more you read, the more skilled and fluent you become.

Think about the complexity of playing a musical instrument: for every note or "dot" on the page, you have to determine which hand and finger is going to play it, where it lies on the instrument, and what amount of force or weight is required for that particular "dot." You also have to determine how long to hold the note or is it a "staccato" where you immediately bounce off the notes. This applies to EVERY note you see on the page. Perhaps this is why studies have found that studying music improves IQ scores!

Back to practicing - a small amount of time daily far surpasses the huge "cram" session just before the lesson. Put practicing into the daily routine, much like getting up and dressed for school, brushing your teeth, etc. The best times for younger children are earlier in the day, perhaps before school or right after school. In our house, practicing took place immediately after returning from school followed by a snack. Routine is what matters. For a beginning student, 10 - 15 minutes is a good place to start, at least 5 times during the week. Never underestimate the value of even 5 minutes. Something is better than nothing. The more you put into it, the more you get out of it.

Spend time with your child - read the comments the teacher has written together with your child. Often the teacher will suggest ways to make the practice time most beneficial. They might suggest spending extra time on the last line, or to count the rhythm carefully, or to correct some notes. Play through the piece at least three times - you will begin to hear improvement with the repetition.

“How do I practice a longer piece?” Break it into sections - your teacher might have already done that for you. Most longer pieces have sections that repeat. For example: in *Pianokids®* Lesson Book 1, *Kites* on page 46: lines 1 and 3 are the same. In line 2, the first 2 bars are almost exactly the same as bars 3 and 4. Finding these patterns in the music helps to make the practice time more efficient. If you’re unsure, ask the teacher for help to find those sections. Rather than trying to master the entire piece, try to master a section or even two bars. The next day, move on to another section, repeat 3 - 5 times, then review the section you mastered the previous day. Another way is to practice a smaller section - maybe a line - hands alone several times, then hands together. Breaking a piece into smaller sections makes the practicing more rewarding and less frustrating. If reading the notes is problematic, say or sing the letter-names, then play the section, singing the letter-names. Writing in the letter-names of each note is strongly discouraged - the goal is to be able to read the NOTES, not just the letter-names.

Don’t always begin practicing with the same piece. If three pieces have been assigned, begin with piece or song A, then piece B, then piece C. The next day, begin with piece B and the following day with piece C. Just like athletes warm up before their practice, musicians must warm-up with scales or exercises. This helps to strengthen muscles but also assist in muscle memory of patterns.

Avoid over-booking your child. As parents, we like to give our children as many opportunities as possible. However, having different activities every night of the week can be over-whelming. Children can be pulled in too many different directions, affecting their ability to succeed. Try to develop a sense of balance so your child can accomplish their tasks without feeling stressed.

Music lessons are often a spiral upward, or a spiral downward. When the student has practiced, pieces are learned and perfected, resulting in praise from the teacher. This creates a sense of accomplishment in the student and the feeling of satisfaction and pride in what they have achieved. When practicing hasn't taken place, the same lesson is repeated. When this occurs for several weeks, the student becomes frustrated and bored. The teacher also becomes frustrated, unable to move the student forward. The student loses interest. Work with your child and establish a daily routine.

Aim to practice at least 4 or 5 days each week. Here is a suggestion for the amount of time to spend daily:

Beginning student through the first year of lessons: 10 - 15 minutes

Second year: 15 - 20 minutes

Third year (eg. Pianokids® Level 3-4): 20 - 30 minutes

Conservatory Grade 3-4: 30 minutes

Conservatory Grades 5-6: 30 - 40 minutes

Conservatory Grades 7-8: 50 - 60 minutes

Conservatory Grade 9-ARCT: 75 - 120 minutes

With routine and purposeful practicing, the study of music can be an enriching experience, lasting a lifetime. Like many things in life, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it.