

## From One Parent To Another...

Encouraging my own children through their music practise is definitely the hardest thing I do all day.

I've got 3 children, one 16 doing piano, one 14 doing violin and one 7 doing piano. The eldest has been at it for 10 years now and I have to admit that there are fleeting moments when I think that my life would be simple if it weren't for music. But this time spent one on one with each of them has also been some of the most rewarding and worthwhile times we have had.

I know that as we persevere and gradually make progress that they are learning priceless life lessons. They are learning that nothing worthwhile comes instantly or without considerable effort. Their brains are being trained to function quickly, memory is developing, co-ordination is refined and ability growing.

Over the holidays I have had the chance to re-read a few old favourites from the bookshelf and I would like to share a few thoughts which I hope will encourage you as you face a new year of being the "home-teacher."

Whenever we sign up for Suzuki music lessons, we as the parent take on the role of being the "home-teacher." Shinichi Suzuki set up this model of the teacher, parent and child triangle. This triangle of cooperation was inspired by the simple observation that he was only with the child for 1/2 hour/week, but the parent was with the child all week. It is clear who has the greater influence. So as you go along to the lessons, turn off those mobile phones and watch and listen. In the lesson the teacher is modelling how you should practise at home. You and I, the parent, have such cluttered brains as we try to juggle the daily logistics of who's where when, that we are unlikely to remember what the teacher does and says unless we write it down! So, rule #1 is get writing!

Here are my Top Ten Tips for better practise:

- 1 Simplify, simplify, simplify. In our attempt to bring up well-rounded children, we have sacrificed proficiency and excellence in one area, for a taste or fleeting acquaintance with many areas. Our children have therefore, not persevered in any one discipline long enough to understand 'how to train', nor how to persist through tough situations. They are experts in dabbling in a bit of this and that, and great at quitting when the going gets tough. Can I urge you to unload some of those extra-curricular activities, and pursue depth in one or two. Does this lead to a "narrow" individual? Not a bit of it. This child is able to develop high ability in one field, learning precious lessons for life about how to learn. In later life, these skills will be transferable to any pursuit he desires.
- 2 Turn off the TV. Do you find yourself calling your children 6 times to dinner because they are glued to the tele? - they haven't practised because they are surfing the net, playing gameboy or a computer game? My advice is, get rid of the competition. Monday to Friday, ban all technology that is not strictly school-related. No chatting, no 'Messenger,' and a time-limit on those phone

calls. On the weekends, they can indulge, once all the essentials are done. Kids will comply with these limits if you administer them consistently. And you won't feel like a nagging banshee.

- 3 If at all possible, get the practise done *before* school. This is easy when your child is at the local preschool or school. But it gets trickier when they leave very early to travel longer distances to high school. When my older two started to leave at 7.20am, I put it to them – would they get up early and fit music in, or would they leave it until 5.30, 7.30, 9.30 in the evening? They opted to get up earlier and years down the track they are happy with that choice. They had both tried the late option once or twice and knew how painful it was. At the same time, I had once tried to do a make-up practise with my youngest child when she was 4 or 5. It was so excruciating and we got so little done, that I vowed I would never do it again. I am not particularly a morning person, but I can't bear to get little mileage for my time. I want to get the greatest benefit out of my input. Can I put it to you to try the morning? – even if it is very early. I think it will revolutionise your child's compliance and concentration; you are fresh and so is the child. The whole exercise is less stressful. Then whatever happens in the afternoon, the child is invited to play etc, the practise is done, the child is free to go and no guilt!
- 4 Go *with* your child to practise. It's not much use telling a small child to "Go and practise." We are so busy running around, that your child will notice that you bother to sit with him. It will tell him how important you think their violin/piano lessons are. Conversely, if you don't make it a priority and go with them, they will know that you don't really take practise seriously at all. The child will learn more about your attitude to the practise than about notes on the instrument.
- 5 Start with tonalisation. Suzuki wrote these simple exercises specifically so that we could focus on making a beautiful tone without the distractions of difficult notes, rhythm, phrasing or fingering. This is a great warm-up but the trick is to get the child not just to go through the motions of playing the notes, but actually *to listen* to the sound they are making and make it more beautiful.
- 6 Before you start, go over the notes you made in the lesson. Precisely what did the teacher want you to focus on this week? What words did she use – if you use these same evocative words, you will jog the child's memory of what was said and done. Which notes/fingering/bowing/phrasing etc needed fixing? Get it clear in your head, and keep reminding the child.
- 7 Get stuck into the new piece while the child is fresh. Don't necessarily start at the beginning – start with the tricky bit and get it out of the way. Choose a bar or two (we call this 'spot' practise) and make sure that the child repeats it *perfectly* many times. It is no good doing it over and over when no 2 times are the same. Otherwise the child just gets very good at playing the wrong thing! When you ask the brain to reproduce it, it will not know which of these

different versions you require. The brain must get exactly the same input, many times over, before a perfect reprint is possible.

- 8 Praise, praise, praise! Catch the child doing something right and praise them. Praise must be constant, specific and lavish. Any little thing you see done well, tell the child how delighted you are to see that behaviour. Chances are you will see it again. There is no need to point out every error that you saw. Choose one point to work on and reward with praise any effort made in that direction even if it is not perfect yet. Remember back to when your child was learning to walk. We all goo and gaa at *any* effort made by an infant in their journey toward walking. We did not grow weary in praising every effort. It never crossed our mind, even after the child had fallen for the 500th time, that perhaps this child had no talent for walking. We did not conclude that this child lacked a special gene for walking! No. We were patient. We had absolute confidence that the child would walk. Somewhere between about 10-24 months, all normal infants succeed at walking. Walking is the most wonderfully complex feat of balance and co-ordination. None of us knows at exactly what age each child will achieve it, but we wait patiently and gasp with delight at every phase of the process.

This is how we should approach our children as they learn an instrument. It matters not, *when* they get past each hurdle, but that they persevere until they succeed. We must have the same confidence that they have the ability to learn to play violin, as we had regarding walking. If *we* believe, they will achieve. There are no special genes, nor special endowments of talent. The only difference is that some parents believe that success is possible, and others do not. What kind of parent will you be?

- 9 Make practise non-negotiable. You expect them to clean their teeth every day don't you, whether they feel like it or not? Feeling like it is not a pre-requisite for practise; Suzuki made the concession that if a child could not eat, they were not required to practise.
- 10 Don't even consider quitting. "Quitters never win and winners never quit." In my experience, it is not always the brightest or quickest that go on and succeed in music. Some exceptional individuals give up because they have never struggled with anything in life before, and when faced with a long, steep learning curve, weary along the way. Often the 'plodders' keep going because they are used to life being difficult and they habitually persevere. Your child may rant and rave and talk about quitting. In my opinion, they are mostly trying to tell you that they are struggling and finding it tough. Don't listen to their precise words, but the message behind the words. They need your support at this moment, not permission to quit.

I firmly believe, that we have to be a 'safety net' for our child. Let them blow off steam, listen to them. It *is* tough. Empathise with them. Think of some endeavour in your life with which you struggle eg quitting smoking, losing weight, exercising regularly etc. These disciplines are incredibly tough. Support your child, but don't give in. One of my children used to test me regularly in my resolve about quitting. My heart would pound, but I didn't give in. Months later,

he would hear of a pupil of mine that had quit, and would say “You’re kidding – why did his mother let him quit?” He felt let down, that the parent had lacked the strength to stand up to the child. I don’t pretend this is easy. It takes loads of emotional energy. But I believe our children are crying out to us to have the guts to stand up to them.

## ***Profile***

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