

Effective Music Practice – a well-kept secret

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“Practice makes Perfect.” Although it rolls off the tongue so easily nothing could be further from the truth. Only **perfect** practice makes perfect. Many children today make little or no progress with music lessons because of inadequate practice habits. To train a motor skill, be it a golf swing or fine piano technique, many **correct** repetitions must be performed. No matter how sincere you are, if you practise the wrong thing, all you achieve is the ability to perform the wrong action really well.

Often children practise in isolation. They may play a passage 6 times over. Parent and child are satisfied that they have done their practice for the day. However, often the child has played the passage 6 different ways. Was any one time correct? Did she actually listen to the changes the teacher requested for the week, or is she still playing it the same way she did before her lesson? Re-learning the passage correctly after hundreds of incorrect repetitions, is much harder than imprinting the correct pattern initially. It would be better if she had not practised at all!

When we talk about ‘music practice’, parent and teacher may use the same words, but that is often where communication starts and finishes. It is as though we are speaking a different language. What the teacher thinks of as ‘practice’ is often vastly different from what the parent has experienced or can even imagine. No wonder that children who sincerely say that they have done their practice often fail to progress as fast as expected.

Just as we catch ourselves mimicking our parents as we raise our children, we also tend to repeat our own experience of music practice habits. For most parents of the current generation this is not a great way to go. The reason for this is steeped in history.

When I was a child, many mums or dads could play the piano. These parents had achieved a sufficient standard of competence to play independently as adults. Singing around the piano was a common family past-time.

At this time the most common style for disciplining children was ‘authoritative’. Children were expected to respect and obey their elders. Then the world was thrown into confusion by the sexual revolution and the feminist movement of the 60s and 70s. With authority under question, many reacted against the severe disciplinary style of the past. Dr Spock promoted the ‘permissive theory’ of raising children. Many parents were enticed to experiment with this new philosophy before its folly was exposed. Amid this chaos many parents lost their way with respect to disciplining their children, unsure of which way to turn. The daily discipline of music practice tests the metal of any adult’s parenting skills. If a mother is not coping with the basics like getting kids fed and off to school, then she will certainly come unstuck with the challenge of daily music practice.

During the 60s and 70s a huge proportion of children ‘dropped-out’ of music having achieved only 3rd grade piano or grade 4 flute. They quit before they had consolidated

enough skill to be able to play independently for the rest of their lives. Often their music reading skills were still in their infancy. This was partly the result of insecure parents, unsure of effective and suitable parenting techniques and the changing nature of discipline. If you survey an average audience today, (with the exception of music professionals), while most adults would dearly love to be able to play, very few adults are able to play an instrument for pleasure.

But there were other factors which contributed to this high drop-out rate. One was the advent of television. Another was the lack of highly trained music teachers, part of the general shortage of trained teachers that accompanied the huge post-war baby boom. In many schools and convents, young women were expected to teach music despite their lack of training and experience as a musician or a teacher. Under stress they functioned inadequately and were often poor role models for their students. Children had their knuckles wrapped if they played a wrong note or suffered verbal abuse. At home their parents lacked confidence and skill to guide and support their youngsters so children dropped out of music in droves. As a generalisation, children did not enjoy music nor did they learn how to practise effectively.

These children of the 60s and 70s are the parents of today. Despite their own poor experience of music education parents today know intuitively that giving children music lessons is of great value, in their physical, academic, emotional and cultural development. Many make great sacrifices to give their children this wonderful gift of enrichment. Sadly, though a lot of money is invested in music, kids often quit or drift along without making much progress.

We music teachers face entrenched attitudes, habits and beliefs that have been handed down for two generations. Without decisive intervention, we will not break through the underlying assumption that 'we are not a very musical family.' Parents hide behind attitudes and beliefs like this rather than face the fact that no effective practice was done. So how can we revolutionise music practice so that it is joyful, effective and efficient. Here is one suggestion.

Baldly speaking the role of the music teacher is trouble-shooting. She is highly trained to notice the difference between the pupil's playing and a model performance. No matter how inspiring she is and how diplomatically she puts it, the teacher is interested in change. She wants to see change in posture or tempo or fingering or phrasing or dynamics etc. Like most humans, pupils are slow to change. They tend to keep on playing the piece as they always have – no matter how many times the teacher demonstrates the changes or asks for them.

So we have to train the child to expect change, to notice what the teacher wants changed, and to focus on the detail of what must be changed for next week. At every moment of the practice session, the pupil must be aware of exactly what they are trying to change.

But more than this, we need to change the parent's expectations. If we only work with the child, we ignore potentially, our greatest and most influential ally. We have noted

that in the past players often failed to reach a sufficient standard for independent playing as an adult. For our pupils to have a lasting skill in music, they must achieve a fairly high level of skill.

In 2004, the programs and requirements of high schools are tremendous. Kids often leave for school at 7am and don't return until 6pm. Then the homework begins. With this colossal load, unless the child progresses as far and as fast as he can in infants and primary school, there is not much hope that he will reach a sufficient level of proficiency that will enable him to play his instrument as an adult. An early start is of great benefit.

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The key to success lies in parental involvement. Just as the parent hears a child's reading and looks over their spelling and mental arithmetic to make sure the child is practicing the right thing, the parent must keep an ear and an eye on the child's music practice to make sure they are playing the right thing. The parent can also help the child maintain focus when they are day-dreaming. The teacher is only present for half an hour per week. It stands to reason that we must equip the parent to help at home. A great start is to get the parent to attend the lesson. This is often a revelation!

I believe that music teachers must address the issue of parent education as never before. Children starting lessons today often lack the basic grounding in pitch and rhythm. Many seem to have missed out on the songs and rhymes and folk music that was a normal part of child rearing a generation or two ago. This is probably one of the results of many mothers working outside the home with children spending long periods of time in long day care centres. I also detect a great lack of parents singing to their children. This reflects the loss of confidence in parent's musicality which is the product of music education and the mass dropping out that occurred in the 60's and 70's.

As a parent of 3 children who learn music, I am very familiar with the huge challenge of music practice. It is hard work encouraging your children over the hurdles. When children start young, a great deal of parent supervision is necessary for the process to be successful. The benefits however are awesome.

I wish that I had known what I know now about kids and music lessons, 12 years ago when my eldest child started music. I now have the advantage of not only wearing the 'parent' hat but also the experience of the teacher. There are many hints that parents can learn quickly and easily that can unlock the door to success and joy with music. It need not take you 12 years to put it together.

I remember the parish minister at the church I attended as a teenager. He said that the best way to keep something secret was to announce it in the notices on Sunday morning! Sometimes I think it is the same with clues about music practice. Despite teachers' best efforts to get the message across, effective music practice remains a well-kept secret.

In an effort to communicate these hints quickly and efficiently I have produced an audio CD entitled *Succeed With Music –How to Maximise Your Investment in Kids' Music Lessons* (available on-line from www.succeedwithmusic.com). It is a powerful take-home tool for parents. Parents can listen at their leisure perhaps in the car or while exercising. I share many ideas that I have compiled over 12 years. I can guarantee that the investment will be worth it – you will recoup the value after just one week of lessons! Already those who have listened have told me just how dramatically their child's progress has accelerated after implementing just one idea from the CD. I have also had great feedback from older pupils who have benefited from many of the tips. I know it will benefit you too.