

Practicing Tips

Learning to play a musical instrument is a skill. To develop this skill, regular practice is required. It is best to practice in short sessions. Quality is far better than quantity. Students should have regular uninterrupted practice on a daily basis. This means EVERY DAY, not just the day before the lesson. Lessons can only be enjoyed if continuous progress is made. This requires practice and concentration. Practice should be relative to the level of playing and the length of the weekly lesson.

| Level: | Daily Practice Length: | Lesson Length: |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Beginners | 15-20 minutes | 30 minutes |
| Grade 1-3 | 30 minutes | 30 minutes |
| Grade 4-5 | 45 minutes | 45 minutes |
| Grade 6-8 | 60 minutes | 60 minutes |
| Grade 9 & above | 60-90 minutes | 60 minutes |

Practicing, like brushing teeth or washing hands, rarely qualifies as "fun." As children mature on their instrument, it will be more fun for them when they can successfully perform a special technique on their instrument, play a piece that they really like, or make music with other young musicians. Often the trick is to get kids into a routine so that practice becomes a habit, like the bedtime ritual. In the early stages, there is a lot to be said for quantity and regularity of practice, because one is training the nervous system, and, in the case of the violin with its unusual position demands, creating brand new neural pathways. There will, of course, be certain weeks when it is impossible for the student to get in much practice, but week in and week out of little or no practice should not be acceptable.

Determine ahead of time four days and times for practice. Some children like to choose their own days or will respond positively if they can pick the time of day to practice. ("Would you like to practice before or after dinner?") It generally takes a full four practice sessions for the fingers and brain to assimilate the assigned music.

Have your child place the music on the stand as soon as s/he comes home from a lesson. Have him/her open the music to the new assignment so that everything will be all ready to go when it's time to play.

Leave the violin and bow out or leave the piano books open on the piano during the week. Find a safe place (away from pets, babies, heat or drafts) where your child can leave the case open during the week with the violin and bow sitting inside set up and ready to play. The hardest part of getting down to practice is often opening up the case, rosinning the bow, putting the shoulder rest on, etc. If the instrument is already set up, then all the musician has to do is pick up the violin and start playing. If your child's piano books are open on the piano, it is easy to sit down and play for a few minutes each time s/he walks by.

Suggest that the child warm up with a favorite piece if getting started is a problem. Then s/he can go through the assigned material.

Remind your child when it's a practice day. It would be so nice if we didn't have to remind kids to practice. Often, no reminder from the parent can mean no practice for the student.

Experiment with being present or within earshot while the child is practicing. Many students will go back and forth between wanting the parent around when practicing and not wanting the parent to hear what is played. If there is a piece the student is stumbling through, suggest "I'd love to hear that last one again" just so the student gets the chance to physically play it once more.

Practicing Tips (continued)

Ask your child to play for you. In the end, making music is about sharing, not sitting alone in a practice room. When your child does play for you, find something to praise, so that s/he will want to perform again. There will always be positive things to comment on--progress since the year before, a good position, a new piece of music s/he is working on, etc.

Lavish praise. Tell your child when you hear something that you like--a piece, a passage, even an interesting sound. Or praise an attitude: "You didn't really feel like practicing this afternoon, but you just went in and did it. Good for you!" I told a student once that I loved how she played a particular piece. I notice that now she warms up with that piece whenever she practices.

Also, getting back to the instrument after a long break can be discouraging. In those first couple of weeks, I find that a good dose of sympathy ("It's hard to get back into the swing of things, isn't it?") and encouragement ("Your fingers still remember that piece!") go a long way.

Attend concerts with your young musician. I find that students often make big strides on the instrument after hearing a concert. One of my young pupils from years ago had a very wishy-washy tone on the violin. After attending a violin performance, the student suddenly developed a lovely sound. When I asked him how he did it, he said that he heard how the soloist was playing and decided that he would play like that, too!

Consider incentives. Offering the child a treat after the lesson gives something to look forward to on lesson day. It can also help alleviate some of the stress of performing for the instructor. Frequently scheduling special events such as television shows, videos, or going out somewhere "as soon as you've practiced" also adds incentive. Practicing seems to happen a lot quicker and with more enthusiasm.