

Family matters

Finding the right level of involvement in your child's instrumental practice can be a tricky balancing act. OLIVER GLEDHILL offers parents some strategic guidance

When your child's teacher ends each lesson with a reminder to practise, do you really understand what this means? How best can you support practising? How involved should you be either in practising or in the lessons? Here I shall try to offer some practical advice, drawing on the findings of the available research evidence.

Elements of practice

First of all, you need to be able to tell the difference between practising and simply playing. Practising is characterised by three main differences: it often needs to be slow, divided into small sections, and it should be analytical or questioning.

Routine and environment

Once you and your child understand what practising is, you can help enormously by establishing a routine. The first element of this is one of attitude, instilling from the outset that your child's instrumental learning will be a long-term commitment to a valued activity, possibly for life. Research by the Australian Gary McPherson (2000) found that the shorter the period of time that children expect to continue learning an instrument, the less they achieve and the sooner they give up.

You may find that choosing a regular time of day for practising helps your child build a pattern of familiarity and normality. Earlier in the day or after a nap, your child might be fresher. Of course, getting ready for school may make early morning practice difficult to achieve, and, as the teenage years approach, the need for a lie-in may seem all the more important, which is perhaps why a recent study (J.R. Austin and M.H. Berg, 2006) found that in the US only seven per cent of instrumental students aged eleven to twelve practised early in the morning. They found that 'distributed' practice – spreading it out across the week or into more than one session on the same day – can help motivation. Grace Rubin-Rabson's 1940 study found that distributed practice can also help with memorising, though the benefits of such distribution favoured learners who are less able; those who are more able may cope better with mass cramming.

However you organise the practising routine, do not worry that you will have to set aside large amounts of time: twelve to fifteen minutes per day is quite sufficient for success in the early stages, rising to an hour by the teenage years, except for the highest achievers at music school level, who tend to begin to exceed an hour by the age of eleven.

Give some thought to the practice -environment: ensure a comfortable temperature, the right-sized chair and a music stand. Reduce distractions from siblings, pets or the television. A good habit to encourage is washing hands to avoid touching the instrument with sticky fingers.

Parental involvement

Once you clearly have in mind the three main elements of practising, and have given thought to the practising routine and -environment, you may be wondering whether to sit in on your child's practice, and if so, whether you should sit quietly, as a supportive presence helping to ease the loneliness of the practice situation, or whether you should get actively involved.

Research evidence on the effectiveness of parental supervision of practice is mixed. J.P. Brokaw (1983) suggested that a parent supervising home practice improves the child's musical achievement, but neither S.A. O'Neill (1996) nor S.F. Zdzinski (1996) found this to be the case in their studies. If you are going to be involved in practice, the crucial factor seems to be that you should get clear feedback from the teacher on each lesson, or sit in and observe the lessons -yourself. That way you can see the teacher modelling practice strategies and observe how the teacher relates with your child during the often stressful or frustrating learning process. You will then be better equipped to carry through a consistent approach at home.

As a parent, you do not need to -understand all the technical terms -associated with playing your child's -instrument, but instead you can pick up cues and prompts from the teacher to help give reminders during practice.

For example, it may be useful to remember a prompt such as 'Wasn't that supposed to be the third finger over on the D string?' simply as a form of words, even if you have not fully absorbed its meaning. If you choose to become actively involved in practice supervision, most studies show that your child is likely to be weaned off such involvement between the ages of about eleven and thirteen.

My own research has found that some parents make a conscious decision not to be involved in lessons, believing that the one-to-one confidential pupil-teacher relationship helps build character and personality in the child through freedom of communication and rapport, and that this outweighs any benefits gained from the parent being present.

Practising strategies

If you are going to be actively involved in practising with your child, there are some very useful strategies to adopt, or to help your child to adopt, to make practice more effective, so saving time and increasing the rate of progress.

Let's look again at the three characteristics of practising: slow, in small sections, and analytical and questioning. If you can encourage your child to practise slowly, this will allow time for both recognition and discrimination of errors: recognising an error means knowing that something has gone wrong, but discriminating means knowing exactly what was wrong, and this clarity will help to put it right next time.

If you can encourage the choice of small, manageable sections or sub-goals to work on, this will help greatly to focus attention. Several studies have consistently found that, left to their own devices, children as novice learners most often play through a piece from beginning to end without stopping. Try to resist the temptation to encourage your child to practise just the nice tunes or to play the whole piece through too often simply because this gives you pleasure as a listener.

You can help the development of an analytical or questioning approach to practising by asking questions about the music or about an error made, but be careful to let your child reach the answer heuristically – through assisted self-discovery. Learning through self-discovery is more meaningful to the child and so the knowledge gained will be better

retained. Prompting your child with the answer too often will tend to cause emotional friction. Try a little scholarly ignorance – pretending not to be sure, even if you are. Waiting sufficient time for answers also plays an important part here: a couple of studies in classroom learning situations (Mary Budd Rowe, 1974; J. Nathan Swift and C. Thomas Gooding, 1983) suggest that three seconds of wait-time for answers is needed. In one-to-one instrumental learning, where other children are not there to interrupt the calm and silent thought-processes, I would suggest that the patience to wait considerably longer than three seconds is often helpful, not just because it gives more time to fathom out an answer, but because it will show that you value your child's learning attempts no matter how long they take.

A specific area where you can encourage analytical questions in string playing concerns tuning and finger placement. Beginners devote most attention to decoding notes on the page: with just a handful of notes learnt, a different line or space up or down is seen to equal a certain finger number. Often beginners do not notice whether the 'correct' finger is in the right place on the string (in tune), or even if it is on the right string at all. Hearing accuracy of tuning usually develops later, as aural connections between notes gradually become learnt patterns, or schemata. Meanwhile, other musical concepts – rhythmic accuracy, dynamics, structure and phrasing, and expressivity – all fall increasingly far down the list of priorities. You may be aware of some of these more complex elements, and if so you can help focus your child's attention on one or two, while trying not to overload them with ideas.

Encouraging your child to memorise is one of the best ways to help take the notes off the page and release 'cognitive capacity' for thinking about all these aspects of music. Musical memory is built up in four ways: aurally (through the sound), -visually (through the appearance on the page or on the instrument), kinaesthetically (through the feel of the movements on the instrument, such as getting used to the feel of a long-distance shift) and analytically (through questioning).

Two practical ways in which you might learn to highlight analytical features for your child are using exit and entrance points, and 'chunking'. For example, if a phrase ends on a B and, after a bar's rest, the next phrase begins on a D a minor 3rd up, you could help your child to notice that interval connection as an aide-mémoire. Similarly, you may be able to highlight where a fingering or bowing pattern is copied in sequence (or has one recognisable difference). Noticing such patterns leads to the idea of 'chunking', or linking small patterns of notes into small meaningful units. If you look for chunking patterns with your child, it helps make the piece seem a lot shorter and simpler.

Close observation of similarities and differences in chunking leads on to another strategy that you may find helpful: variability, or encouraging your child to practise in different ways – perhaps experimenting with variations in bowing patterns or rhythms. The doctoral study of Fiona Pacey (1993) showed that variability can be effective in string players' learning. On a larger scale, and probably with help and advice from the teacher, you might vary the pieces being practised. However, some children, at certain stages, like to focus on limited areas, or perhaps one piece, and this too may provide valuable material for a more in-depth holistic approach.

Psychology of learning

As well as providing a comfortable physical environment in the way that the practice room is set out, try to keep in mind your child's psychological comfort. Though at times it may be difficult, try to resist getting irritated or annoyed if your child seems slow to catch on or wanders in attention. Gaining new knowledge with imagination – which simply means making associative links, like links in a chain, and building these up into patterns – means leaving behind, to some extent, what the child already knows and what feels safe and familiar, in order to make a leap into the unknown. A calm, safe, non-judgemental and supportive atmosphere is needed to feel free to imagine.

In this kind of risk-taking necessary to get to the next stage in their practice, some children will exhibit what Carol Dweck (1986) called 'mastery' behaviour, seeing their own progress as cumulative and in small steps. Many, however, will experience periods of more 'helpless' behaviour, not wanting to attempt the next stage for fear that it will prove too difficult and overwhelming. You may recognise a tendency towards a mastery or helpless learning trait in your own child, which can help you show understanding in support of your child's learning. It is important to remember that children showing helpless behaviour are not less able; in fact, Dweck (2000) found that some 'helpless' children are among the brightest and most skilled.

The role of rewards and fun

While your child is learning to take risks and going through this step-by-step and cumulative process, you will find that you need to offer lots of encouragement and praise, especially in the early stages, before the successful connections of flowing melodies provide their own -motivation. How you offer this praise is important: it will not be helpful in the long run if you praise every attempt as 'Wow!', 'Lovely!' and 'Wonderful!'. We know that it is better to direct praise towards what Jere E. Brophy and Thomas L. Good (1974) call 'learning goals' and Bret P. Smith (2005) has termed 'task goals', rather than towards 'performance' or 'ego goals'. This means identifying what was good about the playing and how it has improved, praising this progress and achievement and so encouraging the development of intrinsic motivation, rather than setting up a system where the child gets praised for less understandable reasons. If the reasons for praise given are unclear, your child may develop a desire simply to please you, or to win rewards such as sweets, stickers, football shirts, outings and other such extrinsic motivators. However, don't be too hard on yourself, because Mark Lepper and his colleagues (1973) found that with a long-term activity such as music learning, with lots of delayed gratification, it may be necessary to keep a child engaged through extrinsic motivational rewards.

Finally an issue that, from a teacher's perspective, crops up fairly regularly when a child's instrumental interest may be waning: a parent often making requests for more fun in the lessons or for more jazzy pieces to be set for practice. Try, as the parent, to remember that motivation for practising increases or reduces according to a complex mix of influences. What children expect to get out of the activity of music, how useful it is thought to be for the future, and how much it is valued, will be balanced against how much effort is perceived to be required to produce worthwhile results. This is called 'expectancy-value' theory. Also important to children is having a strong 'self-efficacy' belief: that they think they are 'good' at playing and feel confident in their knowledge

and skills. There are -complicated motivational issues at work here, and they are often not helpfully solved with a quick-fix solution.