

A Healthy Practice Environment

—Michelle Baylor, January 2010

Instead of an article, this month I would like to pass on a series of checklists to help you and your student examine your practice process. Practice is the most time consuming part of learning the instrument, and the part that happens without any teacher supervision, so it is worthwhile to re-evaluate from time to time to make sure you are on the right track.

What does our practice area look like?

- Out of major traffic paths
- As free as possible from distractions like the TV, telephone, computer, and sibling interruption
- Place to store music and practice notebook where they are easy to access and refer to
- Accessories (footstool and seat cushion for pianists, chin rest for violinists) ready to use

What does our practice schedule look like?

- A time both parent and student are available
- Same time every day
- At least 15-30 minutes of time for parent and student to be together
- A time when both parent and student have energy and willingness to work (right before bed isn't usually the best idea...!)

What should the parent say during practice?

- "It looks like your lesson notes say that we should ..."
- "I really like the way you played ..."
- "Let's try that part again and listen for ..."
- "... is so much better than when you played it yesterday!"
- "Could you show me how to ...?"
- "Thank you for playing for me."

What should the student say during practice?

- "I'd like to try that again."
- "Could you write a note so we can ask Mrs. Baylor about how to ...?"
- "My goal for this part is ..."
- "Thank you for listening to me."

What can we do to change our practice routine a little?

- Practice everything in a different place on your instrument (use notes that are higher or lower)
- Play a practice game. Check your September article for a few ideas, or ask Mrs. Baylor for some more!
- Start at the end of your lesson notes and work to the top, just for a temporary change of pace.
- Have the student practice with a different parent. Not something to do every single time, but sometimes the parent who hasn't attended the lesson has different insights or notices different things, and the student will learn a lot by trying to remember and explain the lesson notes to someone new.
- Involve listening in your practice time—listen to your CD for the part you are working on
- Include "messing around" time as part of practice. Let your student experiment with the instrument just to see what kinds of sounds it can make, or fiddle around trying to poke out the melody to a song they like
- Have a silent practice—neither parent or student can talk (maybe charge 1 M&M for each lapse into speech!)
- Practice without the instrument. Hum or sing your songs, practice hand movements or posture on your lap or on an invisible instrument, do your reading assignment by saying the letter names rather than playing them.

Try to mark one thing from each section that you want to add to your practice environment!