

How to Practice

—Michelle Baylor, September 2009

You and your student have had your first lesson. You come home with a binder, music, a CD, and the echoes of the teacher's voice in your heads. Now what? It's time to practice what you are learning!

Where should we practice?

Obviously, practice happens in the room where the instrument is. (Violinists have a little more choice here!) There's more to the practice environment than just that, however. The instrument is part of the "where," but a good practice location also needs to include your music, your notebook, and a chair for the parent to sit in. Pianists need a footstool and cushions for the bench so they are seated with the proper posture. Violinists need a shoulder rest (and eventually a music stand). Your practice environment should be someplace that isn't getting a lot of traffic and interruptions—turn off the phone, ask siblings to stay in a different room, and focus on the student.

When should we practice?

Practice time is up to you, but make it part of your daily schedule. Instead of saying "We'll practice when we get a chance every day," look at your daily calendar and say "We always practice right before breakfast," or "Practice time is right after school," or "4:30 is when we meet at the piano." Practice time should be as consistent as possible, so it becomes part of the daily routine and is less likely to be forgotten.

What should we practice?

The practice sheet that is filled out at each lesson is your guide to a successful practice session. Follow the instructions from the teacher that are noted there. A typical practice session should start with a warm-up (if the student is doing those), and then move to review. This allows the student to work first on something familiar and hopefully successful! Then move on to work on the new Suzuki piece being studied. Don't forget reading (if there is any yet) and please end with a hug and a positive compliment!

How should we practice?

Practice does not mean sitting in front of the piano poking away until a 30 minute timer goes off. Practice does not mean playing as quickly as possible through a list of pieces and triumphantly shouting "All done!" Practice means using the steps outlined in the lesson to make progress toward specific goals. Hopefully most of the practice sheets have all these steps and goals well outlined! The "how" is the part of practice where parents are most important, especially for kids younger than 9 or 10. The parent helps the student listen to his own performance and evaluate if his attempt is moving toward the goal. When you practice with your student, try your hardest NOT to play the piece from the beginning to the end right off the bat. This usually ends up practicing lots of mistakes, not lots of success! Start directly at the part to be worked on—yes, usually that is in the middle of the song. Work the goal directly where it occurs. Play the measures or section several times, each time reminding yourself and the student verbally of what the goal is. After success has been achieved, repeat the section until success happens at least 3 times in a row. Finally, if appropriate, go back to the previous section or the beginning of the piece and play the whole thing with the goal in mind.

Why should we practice?

Practice is not meant to be an exercise in tedium, or mindless repetition, or a way to kill time. The reason daily practice is so important is because ongoing repetition is what trains the mind and the muscles to cooperate quickly and smoothly enough to produce the beautiful musical results we are hoping for. A mental understanding of the concept is only part of the process—making the concept flawless, beautiful, and easy to produce is the rest of it! Children learn how to run at age 2 or 3, but athletes continually practice so their bodies stay healthy and can respond effectively to the commands their minds give. Musicians need to stay in shape too, and practice is what makes that happen!

How can we make practice fun?

A few simple practice games you might enjoy...

- Line up M&Ms, Cheerios, raisins, or other treats. Each time the child is successful in achieving the goal, they get to eat a treat. When all the treats are gone, it is time to work on a different goal for the day.
- Use a handful of coins. When the child is successful, one coin goes into his pile. When the child is unsuccessful, all the coins he has won go back into the parent's pile. Keep repeating until he wins all the money, and he gets to keep it!
- Take turns working on the goal. Parent, listen to the child's attempt. Then try it yourself and have the child listen to you. Make mistakes on accident or on purpose and see if the student catches you!
- Bring a pile of blocks or Legos close to the practice place. Each successful repetition earns one piece. Keep practicing until the child can build a tower, a pyramid, a monster, a robot—whatever suits her fancy!