

How to Help Your Child Practice at Home

Knowing what practice is and why it's valuable will assist you in helping your child make the most of her time at the instrument. It will also guide you in dealing with the resistance that will happen on occasion, even with the most dedicated child. Your child will be very frustrated with her inability to carry out the lesson assignment at home the longer she waits between practice sessions because she has forgotten what to do and how to do it. Therefore, daily practice will give your child the most progress for her effort and will keep frustration to a minimum.

Practicing seven days a week is not realistic for every student or every family, however, the student might like "a day off." If she practices six days a week, her tasks will be well reinforced and one 48-hour gap will not affect her overall retention significantly. **The day after or before the lesson is never a good choice for the vacation day.** Home practice is also a time to experiment. After she completes her assignment, encourage your child to explore. Perhaps she can pick out a tune by ear, play a song she already knows but in a different way, or make up her own song. Playing an old song or two is fun; this is also a good way to reinforce your child's progress and point out that her efforts are bearing fruit: "Do you remember back at Christmas when this song was so hard for you?" Looking ahead in her materials is another productive activity: your child can see how much of the upcoming material she already knows and can challenge herself to figure out some of the rest.

Finally, home practice is a time for the family to participate in the child's music study. This can take the form of "family concerts" after dinner, playing duets with another family member, or participating in the games the teacher assigns (to work on note-reading or counting).

The Secret Weapon: Don't expect the child to practice on her own!

The secret weapon is YOU and your direct involvement in your child's home practice!

Important: **The main reason children want to quit piano is that the parent assumes the child can carry out the assignment by herself. She can't.** Frustration, confusion, and despair set in when the child can't carry out the task by herself. And then the parent is upset ("Is my child unable to play the piano? Is she unmusical?") and wonders whether the money and effort being expended is worth it. Of course, parents don't deliberately leave the child alone at the piano. It's just something they've never thought to avoid. Now you know the secret!

So, be directly involved. On the bench if the child is young. In the room when the child is older. Note: Learning HOW to PRACTICE is a different skill altogether from actually playing the instrument.

Help with the Lesson Assignment

With young children, you may have to be involved directly for the entire practice session at first. Even after a long period of study, your help may be needed for most of the practice time. With children under age 10, plan to sit in the room with the child, even if you are not on the bench with her.

At Home Immediately After the Lessons

After you return home, sit down with your child and play through the lesson assignment one time. This should consume 10 minutes at most. For each part of the assignment, ask your child to describe what she is supposed to do and why and then have her play it for you. This will acquaint you with what you should be hearing and how you should be hearing it, and your child will know that you are aware of precisely what the teacher has requested. Should there be questions, call the teacher right away for clarification rather than let the child ignore an element of his assignment all week (or worse: do it incorrectly and later have to un-learn!).

A Consistent Practice Time

Most students benefit from a consistent piano practice time. Adults find a routine helps them shoo horn in all they must do; children draw security from routine. Schoolwork is first priority. If there is a large assignment that evening, there may be no time for practice because schoolwork is most important; however, after schoolwork comes piano playing. When that is complete, then there's time to play outside, talk on the telephone, watch TV, or whatever else they'd like to do. It's important that children know that *piano study falls right after schoolwork in the day's hierarchy*. If there are daily household chores the child is expected to take care of, these come third. They should understand that some days their homework load and their piano time might preclude most or all of their playtime. Not every day, surely, but sometimes. They should understand and accept this before study begins so they can't plead ignorance when faced with a situation like this. Of course, children may "unwind" by having a snack or changing clothes, but right after that, it's time to hit the books. No getting sidetracked with a magazine or playing with a friend or watching an afternoon TV show.

At-Home Quiet Zone

It goes without saying that other family members should not be in the piano room during practice time. Nor should they be causing a racket elsewhere in the house. Not only is the noise itself distracting, but your child's curiosity will be piqued by the possibility that something interesting is going on elsewhere and she will be distracted and restless. Most families find that practice time for one child is a perfect homework time (or story time) for another.

Reminders

Sometimes, you may have to remind your child to practice. Occasionally, you'll have to remind more firmly! No matter her level of interest in music study, your child is only human and some days she will want to do something else before piano, or skip practice altogether. Take a deep breath. Ask the child to play an old song. Applaud her effort! Take another deep breath, hug your child, and say how proud you are! If things go completely downhill, ask your child just to play some favorite songs for you. Don't worry about her assignment. This keeps her at the piano (for enjoyment!), and gives you relaxation and rejuvenation! A regular practice time and at-home quiet zone helps, as does an obvious interest and commitment from the parent(s), as noted.

Remember that young children can't be expected to practice on their own or even remember it's time to do their practice. Some even forget whether they've done it or not! If you constantly experience trouble inducing your child to practice (tantrums, tears, shouting), something is wrong. Your child may not have thought out the time and effort necessary for learning to play a musical instrument. Or, she may have changed her mind when she discovered it's not like TV: with piano study she is a participant; with TV she is only a spectator. Another

possibility is that she has some other problem which is preventing her from feeling her effort is producing a worthwhile result (a sibling is being a pest during practice time, the other parent is making disparaging remarks about piano study, etc.). Consult the teacher for advice.

Dealing with Rebellion about Piano Playing Time...Short answer: Stay the course!

Sometimes it will be difficult, and you'll feel like throwing in the towel. (Enough! The hassle isn't worth it! Go ahead and quit!!) Don't. You're doing the right thing, and your child will thank you forever for providing the instrument, the opportunity to study, and your resolve to teach them responsibility when they want to quit something that isn't easy. Piano study isn't easy; if it were, everyone would be doing it. **I have never heard an adult say her mom let her quit piano and was glad that she did! EVERY one of them says she is sorry she quit.** Your children will thank you, so stay the course when things get rocky. Remember you're giving your child a gift that can't be taken away and one that will bring a lifetime of joy...even when it seems the direct opposite is true while you're in the process!

Copyright 1996, Martha Beth Lewis, Ph.D