

## You Don't Have to Do it All

At the parent sessions I have done at workshops, institutes, and seminars, I usually ask parents to write their questions and concerns on note cards. In this fairly anonymous format, I tell them that I'm particularly interested in the concerns they are afraid to bring up with their regular teachers, other parents, or perhaps even their spouses. As I've read these questions aloud over the years, I've watched hundreds of parent faces smile nervously in recognition when I read questions such as "Why is it that when I ask my child to repeat something, he sighs like I've just asked him to do something totally impossible?" I've also seen those same faces begin to relax when they discover that they are not alone in their struggles.

I have listened to the concerns of parents in other ways as well—comments between classes, cafeteria line questions, and discussions while driving me to and from airports. And this is what I've discovered: parents worry.

So I want to get two things out of the way, right away.

First of all, your child doesn't need for you to be a perfect parent. I like the way the British pediatrician D.W. Winnicott put it: every child needs an "ordinary devoted" parent. And a parent's anxiety about being a *perfect* parent isn't a substitute for this ordinary devotion that every child needs. To Winnicott's ideas, I add the following: even when practicing an instrument with your child, perfection is still not required. However, as with parenting in general, your consistent presence is important.

If you're like most of the parents I have worked with over the past twenty years—and I'm sure you are—you want to know how to practice with your child in ways that maximize your usefulness and minimize your interference. This book is here to help you do that. In ordinary ways.

Here's the second thing to get out of the way: you don't have to read this entire book for it to be helpful or for it to make sense. It's not like a series of math courses in which you can't take algebra because you missed the class on addition. You're a parent. I know you're busy.

Of course, if you *want* to read this book cover to cover, you may. You could also use it as a reference book, reading just the sections that address your immediate needs. Or use it as a daily dose, reading one or two sections a day before starting practice. Or use it as a textbook, reading just the portions your teacher assigns.

You may find yourself reading a chapter one day, a small section three weeks later, and the rest of the book in six months. Many sections have cross-references, which allow you to hop around the book as your needs and interests dictate. Or you can just ignore the cross-references altogether. My hope is that you find a way to make the book useful for *you*.

I've organized this book into "neighborhoods." Each chapter has several separate sections, or "blocks," within those neighborhoods. Now you know why the table of contents looks like a subway map.

As you make your way through the book, you'll discover that many of the same concepts and themes keep reappearing. That's by design. Just as it's handy to have a neighborhood store where you can grab a quick loaf of bread, it's important to have the staples of practice where you need them. That's why they're all over the book. For example, all of the chapters reflect a common set of concerns and values that are difficult to exhaust, such as how to make practices both pleasant and productive. Each chapter is also unique. Every neighborhood has a place to grab a jug of milk; but not every neighborhood has a place to buy a sheet of birch plywood.

The idea that "repetition is the heart of learning" is one of the most important ideas I picked up during the year I studied with Shin'ichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki Method™. He constantly cycled through the basics of playing the violin—something his teaching was famous for—and in the process I came to understand the importance and richness of these basics. I believe that the staples in this book, which come from a variety of disciplines, not just music, are at the heart of practicing any instrument with your child. Actually, they are more than staples. I think of them as soul food.

## You Are Unique—And So Are Your Challenges

Written in calligraphy and simply framed, the words “Monotony is the enemy of music,” hung in Shin’ichi Suzuki’s studio, and he referred to them often when our playing got, well, *boring*. Sometimes he read the words out loud himself. Sometimes he had us read them out loud. And sometimes he just pointed.

Suzuki was also quite fond of something else the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals once said:

Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.

I think it’s helpful for every parent to understand something similar: *there is no other parent in the world quite like you*. Of all of the parents around you, none is able to care about your child the way you do. As a parent, you are unique. And you and the child you happen to be practicing with at any moment make a unique combination. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another parent just like you. There has never been a relationship just like your relationship with the child you practice with. (If you have more than one child, of course, you have more than one unique relationship.)

There is not one single way to be a parent, just as there isn't a single way to be a student—or a teacher, for that matter. Because of my respect for the uniqueness of each parent and his or her situation in life, it is impossible for me (or anyone else, in my opinion) to write a manual that tells you exactly what to do in each and every practice situation you face. Without a manual to consult, you're left with learning how to assess the situation as you go.

I like to think of daily practicing—and much of parenting in general—as a journey in which you come upon one yellow light after another. While red and green lights are pretty clear-cut—red means stop, green means go—a yellow light means that the driver has to check out the traffic conditions and make a decision in a split second. You've got more time when you're practicing, but still, you're facing a yellow light if you tell your child to play “Lightly Row” and “French Folk Song” comes out instead. Your reaction is likely to vary from that of another parent. Another parent might decide that it's important for the child to develop an awareness of directions, and stop the child immediately. You, on the other hand, knowing that your child is usually pretty good at following directions but currently has a distracting paper cut, may be grateful that anything at all came out of the instrument. So you simply point out that the last note was particularly lovely. Both of these reactions are appropriate. As the driver, you're the one who must decide.

A professional (such as myself) who lives outside of your unique traffic patterns can offer you a kind of “driver's ed.”—information and knowledge that will enrich your understanding and skills. But I can't predict the specifics you'll encounter. That's why the idea that practice happens during a yellow light is one of the central themes of this book. There's a yellow light on the cover, and I like to think of the gray circles that surround the section numbers as yellow lights. I encourage you to take whatever enrichment you get from this book to that string of yellow lights you and your child approach during your daily practices.

Even though each parent/child relationship is unique, it's still important to teach children basic facts that *aren't* unique. They do need to know that  $1 + 1 = 2$  and that Paris is the capital of France. As important as these facts are, however, it is equally important that we find opportunities