

How to help your child succeed at music lessons

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Many parents know that music lessons are beneficial for their children but may not realize how extensive those benefits are. If you are considering having your child start music lessons, you will be happy to know that there have been scores of studies over the past 50 years that add facts and statistics to back up a parent's intuition.

One theme that ties together many of the studies is that music students out-perform non-music students on achievement tests in reading and math. Musical study and performance develops skills such as reading, anticipating, memory, listening, forecasting, recall, and concentration, all valuable academic tools for excelling in school; especially math, reading, and science. Recent studies have clearly indicated that musical training physically develops a part of the left side of the brain known to be involved with processing language, and can actually wire the brain's circuits. Music study also teaches the value of sustained effort to achieve excellence. It helps enhance teamwork and discipline. Music even enhances physical abilities. Students who can perform more complex rhythms, can also make faster and more precise corrections in many physical situations. Without question, a quality music program is a good investment in your child's educational development and overall well being.

Finding a Teacher

Not every teacher is a good match for every child. Once you are committed to starting music, the next step is to find the right teacher. There are a number of different points to consider when searching for the best teacher for your child. A good place to start is with recommendations from other people. Ask parents of a student who is progressing well and enjoying playing the instrument. There are also teacher search sites on the Internet, websites of individual teachers and music schools. Select several teachers and research them based on both their posting and through personal interview.

While each teacher will have different strengths, the two main points to consider are depth of musical experience and the capacity to teach. An instructor's results are usually the best indication of a successful teacher. Just because someone studied music in the university, doesn't necessarily make him/her a good teacher. The following is a guide to questions you should consider. Each of the questions may potentially have answers that are exceptions to the general rule. Remember that the whole picture is what is important.

Musical Experience

- A. It is important that the instructor be an active performing musician. What is the instructor's professional level? Teachers performing in professional level groups are more likely to know the ropes than those in more beginning level groups.
- B. What type of musical training does the instructor have? Where did he/she study music? What was the level and experience of his/her instructors? Were his instructors professional musicians?

Teaching Level

- A. What are the instructor's results? Find out what their former students are doing. How long does their average student study before getting accepted into the first level of the Youth Symphony? Do they have students in the highest levels of Youth Symphony? Have any of their students won competitions or been accepted to a notable program or teacher?
- B. What type of teaching experience does the teacher have? What ages do they have experience with? Where have they taught? How long?
- C. Does the teacher encourage or discourage parent participation for young students? Keep in mind that young children (under 10) generally don't remember what a teacher has told them to do for a whole week between lessons.

Once you select a teacher, you will find that many offer a one-time sample lesson with no obligation to continue. You might consider trying a sample lesson with your top two or three choices. See who your child responds to more.

Getting the Most out of Lessons

Once you settle on a teacher, you will want to help your child get the most out of his lessons. Music is a commitment. Limit the number of activities your child is involved in or he will be overwhelmed. I find that one sport and one instrument is plenty for most kids. Schools often give plenty of homework, and kids also need time to play and explore interests on their own. Although a few exceptional kids under the age of 8 do well taking lessons alone, most need a parent to help them remember what to practice. Take notes. Ask questions. Show your child that you feel he is doing something valuable and important. Don't schedule other activities and appointments that will cause him to miss a lesson or a performance. Remember, there are far more soccer games in a season than musical performances. By choosing the performance, you are letting your child know that music is important. Praise and showing interest are important motivators for young musicians. Always remember to celebrate the small achievements. Dr. Suzuki recommended that you make sure that praises always outnumber criticisms.

During lessons, you will find that not all teachers write down the important concepts they want a student to practice. If points are not written down, they are often forgotten no matter how well intentioned the student. If your child is old enough to take lessons without you, provide him with a notebook. Ask him to write down the most important things the teacher asked him to do each practice. If you are still attending your child's lessons, take notes yourself.

Finally, a musician needs to perform. A child practicing alone in his/her room will not see the point in learning the instrument. Many teachers have recitals, but if yours does not, you will need to become creative to provide young musicians with opportunities to perform. Join the local youth symphony or school orchestra. If your child is not in a musical group, find other performance opportunities. Are there music students at school or church who might get together to form a group? Enter school or social group talent shows. Have kids play at a party or other event. The more exposure they have, the easier and more fun playing in public becomes. Music is also an activity done with other people. Finding a buddy to practice with occasionally makes practice more fun. In summer, you can find a variety of music camps. Getting together with other young musicians is fun both music-wise and socially.

Practice

People who have not studied music often don't understand the details of what makes good music practice. First, regularity is important to build fine motor control. A little bit of practice daily is actually more effective than a long practice once or twice a week. Three or less practices during the week result in little progress.

Second, many people are under the mistaken impression that children will want to practice when they like the instrument and that balking at practicing means they do not want to learn to play. Neither is true. Practice itself is a learned skill. Children don't innately understand how to practice or why it is important. Think back to training your child to brush her teeth every night. If you had left it up to her, her teeth most likely would rarely be brushed. Like brushing, practicing is a habit that can be taught. A child who practices regularly makes progress and therefore has a much more satisfying experience. Conversely, children who don't practice regularly become frustrated and embarrassed by their lack of progress.

Find a quiet place without distractions. Buy a music stand. Pick a regular time for practice. I find that the most productive time is between school and homework. Music gives the academic mind a chance to refresh so that after music, homework often goes quicker. Unless you are the exceptional family, before school rarely works. The kids may not be fully awake, and they often feel too pressured by time to fully concentrate.

If your child is 8 or under, you will often need to supervise the whole practice. Younger children have only vague concepts of what to do during practice. Children over 8 still need some guidance. Check in with them and find out what they are doing. Help your child understand that satisfying the clock won't make him a musician. Mastering something new, however small, on a daily basis, will result in progress. Many kids will start out enthusiastically, but get discouraged when they realize that learning an instrument will take time and commitment. Offer rewards if necessary to get over a hump, but do this judiciously; kids also need to learn that perseverance pays off. The concept of long term might be the most important concept learned in music education.

