

A Parent's Guide to Piano Lessons

Chapters from “A Parent's Guide to Piano Lessons” by James W. Bastien, one of America's leading authorities on piano teaching

Practice Suggestions

Learning any new skill such as typing, a foreign language, or a sport, requires practice; the same is true for learning to play the piano. As a parent you can play a significant role in helping your child over the hurdles of practice.

How much should my child practice?

This question is usually the first one asked. For help in answering it, ask your child's teacher to recommend a certain length of time according to his age and grade. Probably the teacher will recommend a practice schedule which begins with a short amount of time and increases as your child's attention span increases.

Here is a general practice guide:

15 minutes a day for the first month

20 minutes a day for the next two months

30 minutes a day for the remainder of the first year

More practice time will be required in succeeding years, depending on the child's interests and responsibilities in school and at home.

It will help your teacher if you encourage your child to write his practice time down in a music notebook. It is important for the teacher to know your child's practice record, because sometimes even though a great deal of practice time to produce good results. By comparing the practice time with the results, your teacher can help accordingly.

Regarding practice time, it is not necessarily quantity that counts, but *quality*. Therefore, fifteen or twenty minutes of daily concentrated practice usually results in steady progress for the beginner.

When and how often should my child practice?

A child will respond more readily to his practice time if he has a *regular* time set aside each day. The scheduling of practice time should be given careful consideration to avoid conflicts with favorite TV programs, play periods, homework and fathers who insist on “peace and quiet.”

If your child's attention span is short, use two short practice sessions: perhaps one before school, and one in the afternoon or evening. If your child arises early, the time before school is especially useful for practice, because there is no conflict from TV, play and scheduled activities.

Whether your child needs two short practice periods or one regular-length practice period, establish a *routine* which will become a daily habit. You will be surprised to find that your child will come to think of his practice time as a normal part of the day, like meals, school, play and bedtime.

Daily practice is recommended because practice should not be crammed before the lesson. Time is needed to assimilate the week's lesson which can be learned best by spacing out practicing time during the week.

Be careful how you approach the practice time. Use gentle persuasion rather than brute force to get your child to the piano bench. Don't tell your child to "get in there and practice or you'll be punished and have to give up TV for a week." Rather, encourage your child to practice. Tell him you enjoy hearing him play, that he has done a great job so far this week, and that you are eager to hear what he can accomplish each day. Be quick to praise what he has done in practice sessions and slow to criticize. Also, be a bit flexible with a daily routine. If a conflict comes up during the regular practice time, adjust to another time to avoid antagonism and hostility from your child.

Your child may have difficulty practicing on the day of the lesson. If there is time before the lesson, a brief practice session is useful and helps bring the materials studied during the week into focus. If your child goes directly from school to his lesson, the only opportunity for practice prior to the lesson will be the morning period before school.

After the lesson, practicing is optional. Some children are eager to try new pieces assigned; others prefer to wait until the next day to resume the practice schedule.

What about missed practice periods due to unavoidable conflicts, such as doctor's or dentist's appointments, relatives or friends visiting, special trips, etc.? Conflict such as these will occur; therefore, a little longer time can be given to succeeding practice sessions, and more time on weekends can be utilized. Generally, aim for a six-day practice week; then, if a day is lost because of a conflict, a five-day practice week will suffice (for that week).

Should I help my child practice?

In the beginning nearly every child needs help between lessons. A guiding hand at home will be very helpful for your child and will please a grateful teacher. The language your child is learning is one totally unfamiliar and abstract to him—note and rest names, counting time, clef signs, key signatures, interval names, chord names, expression marks and Italian words. This is quite a big order for a youngster to learn on his own.

Your first valuable assistance should be to *organize* the practice session. In the beginning help your child read his assignment carefully to see what is expected of him for the week. By understanding the assignment, your child can use his time wisely instead of blindly plunging in. If written work is assigned, make sure your child has a supply of pencils handy, and check over the work to see that it has been done. Make sure *all* the assigned material is covered.

Try to keep all materials in a music case when your child is not practicing. Otherwise you may have to help your child gather his music together. Children have a way of scattering things, so that the assignment book is in the kitchen, the pencils are in the bedroom, some music is in the den, and some music has fallen behind the piano! Make sure *all* materials are in one place before your child starts to practice to avoid using up "practice time" for a room-to-room search.

When your child is practicing, try to keep him free from interruptions (dogs and cats, brothers and sisters, stereo or TV noise, etc.). Make sure his place of practice is quiet and well lit—a place which is generally conducive to concentration.

It is very important initially to develop good habits at the piano. Check with your teacher regarding height at the keyboard, posture and hand position. If you don't have an adjustable piano chair or stool at home, it may be necessary to raise your child up to the proper height at the keyboard with telephone books or cushions. Your teacher can give you good advice in this regard.

It is helpful for the beginner if the parent is nearby during practice sessions. If your child willingly accepts help, you can tactfully assist him in making sure he understands the directions in his music book, helping him with notes, counting time, etc., and encouraging him to "try it once again."

If for some reason you cannot be in the room for any or all of the practice time (perhaps you are not at home, too busy, or your presence in the room creates problems), set aside several times during the week to hear your child's lesson. Your child will be eager to show you what he has accomplished, and you can bolster and encourage him by such phrases as: "It sounds beautiful"; "I love to hear you play"; or, "I'm so pleased how well you have done this week." Positive remarks will give your child confidence, which is what will be needed when

he goes to his lesson where perhaps he will be told that his efforts were less than spectacular. Patience, persistence, enthusiasm and encouragement on your part will add fuel to the fire to kindle your child's musical interest.

What if I don't know anything about music?

If you're a musical novice, take heart. You don't need to be a skilled musician to help your child practice, at least in the beginning stages. What is mainly needed from you is an interest in your child's accomplishments. A conscientious effort on your part to organize your child's practice time, make sure the assignment is completed and give encouragement at home may be more important incentives than those of musically knowledgeable parent who nags at home for absolute perfection and injects musical views contrary to those of the teacher.

By helping your child practice from the beginning, you will learn basic music information which is easy to comprehend, even if you know nothing about music. In the beginning some standard folk song arrangements probably will be included among your child's pieces. If so, you should have no trouble helping in these practice sessions. Encourage your child to sing while practicing. You will be able to tell if the tune and rhythm are more or less correct. (Singing will help develop your child's "musical ear.") However, for more detailed aspects of music, you may need some help. Therefore, as an aid for parents without music knowledge, the music facts in Appendix A (see page 57) provide assistance.

Many parents become interested in taking lessons themselves through helping their children practice. This is an enjoyable hobby which gives a great deal of satisfaction and fulfillment. It's never too late to start. You might even surprise yourself!

Should I reward my child for practicing?

You probably will want your child to take lessons for several years in order to give him an adequate music background. Although you view practice now as time well spent which will result in good later, your child may not share your long-range view. He may see practicing as a daily task which cuts into his play time. He might not like having to assume responsibility for practicing which requires self-discipline. He may feel isolated and lonely during practice sessions. So in a sense, at this stage in his life, he is doing you a favor by practicing. For a favor, there should be a reward.

You can reward your child by showing appreciation for his music study in many ways. Praise him by telling him how proud you are of his accomplishments. Reward him with a trip to the zoo, a picnic outing, having a friend spend the night, or by giving him some other type of lessons (swimming, tennis, ballet, etc.) which he requests. You can also reward him by including his practice as part of his duties toward his weekly allowance. However you reward your child, do it in a way that lets him know that you *care* about his musical accomplishments, and that you appreciate his efforts. Bess Myerson states it aptly: "The greatest reward for a child ... is the realization that the music is bringing pleasure, openly expressed, to the parents and to the teacher. A bravo or two never hurt anybody."¹

¹Bess Myerson, "My Mother, My Piano—And Me." Reprinted courtesy of *Redbook Magazine*, June 1974 issue.