

Tips for Parents for Successful Practising with Children

By Yoko Shibata and Jenny Macmillan

Practising a musical instrument with one's own children is a huge skill. Even with plenty of support from Suzuki teachers, practising will often be a challenge for parents. This article is based on the results of a questionnaire devised and analysed by Yoko Shibata with responses from Suzuki families learning piano, cello and double bass with Jenny Macmillan and her daughter Pippa. Responses show that, on average, parents are satisfied with practices two times out of three. However, even the parents of more advanced children, and a parent/child pair who seem to work efficiently together, have days when child and/or parent end practise nearly in tears. So what affects the success or otherwise of a practice? What can we improve? We hope that the ideas and suggestions generated will help other parents when practising with their children.

Unsuccessful practice

Let us first define common factors which can lead to unsuccessful practices:

- Child is tired.
- Child cries or argues.
- Parent is impatient or frustrated (often when parent is tired, too).
- Time is limited—parent is rushed.
- Parent is trying to do too much.
- Child needs to relearn repertoire pieces which have been forgotten.
- Parent and child are in conflict over a matter separate from practice.

Often we can predict when the practice is going to be bad before we start. The child is tired after school, it is getting late and s/he is hungry. The parent is tired from a long day at work or caring for young children and has a long list of things to cover before the next lesson, which is only a few days away. There are only a couple of hours

before bedtime in which to practise, eat, do homework, bathe and go through the bedtime routine. The parent may need to insist that the child come away from a favourite television programme, which puts the child in a bad mood.

In addition to those common factors, there are other contributors to unsuccessful practices:

- Parent has a fixed idea of what to achieve; s/he is not flexible enough with the child and the situation.
- Parent made poor notes in lesson.
- Practice is poorly planned and not structured.
- Practice takes place outside normal routine time slot.
- Other children in the house disturb the practice.
- Parent cannot persuade child to practise at all!

Successful practice

Now let us see what contributes to a successful practice. Here are the common replies:

- Child is not tired.
- Parent is calm.
- No interruptions from other children, pets, phone calls, etc.
- Parent allowed more time than necessary to cover the materials.
- Parent is not interrupting child while s/he is playing.
- No conflict or argument between parent and child outside of practice.
- The lesson focused on small, clear points to practise.
- Parent turns tasks into enjoyable games and challenges for the young child.
- Practice has clear target, e.g., a new piece to learn, concert to aim for.
- Child enjoys the practice—has an



Father and son practising

audience of soft toys, feels s/he is playing games rather than doing tasks, is offered edible rewards or stickers for achievement. Practise ends on a high note with a favourite piece or playing a duet.

- Child is satisfied with achievement, having coloured or ticked several boxes on chart.
- Parent remembers to praise, praise, praise the child!

Here are some children's views of what is a successful practice:

- I'm not shouted at.
- I've had some food first—I feel irritable when I am hungry.
- I'm so bored that practising is the best option.
- I get a reward like a chocolate bar at the end of the practice.
- I have some control or choices.
- There is a structure.
- There is some agreement with my mum what to practise.

For a successful practice, both parent and child need to be well rested and fed; they are not arguing with each other; the parent is prepared for the practice (equipped with well-written notes from lessons, having figured out in advance how to turn tasks into manageable chunks or into games or challenges, and with charts or rewards to hand); and parent is staying calm and remembering to praise the child.

It is important for parents to be in the right frame of mind, anticipating their child's needs, identifying what may potentially go wrong, and trying to eliminate those factors. This includes, for example, not practising during their child's favourite television programme. On the other hand, this can be used positively—try to finish the practice before the favoured television programme (or other activity) so the reward is to watch the favourite programme. It is also helpful to practise in the morning when children are fresh, rather than after school when they and parents are often tired.

Parents can use their imagination to find new ways of practising so it is not the same every day. Variety prevents boredom from setting in. All children are different, as has been noted by parents who have more than one child. What suits one child may not suit a sibling. Ideally, parents provide both flexibility and focus in the practice. It is up to the parents to make practices successful and enjoyable. The good news is that each parent is not alone with this challenge—and even Suzuki teachers have the same problems with their own children.

Here is a description of how Jenny used to practise with her three children when they were young. This shows the importance of regularity, of allowing more time than necessary, and having some fun time so that children will want to practise the next day too:

The critical point is that we always did two piano practices a day (except on those few occasions when we went out for the day, when I felt we were too tired and it would be counter-productive to try to practise in the evening). While the children were at primary school (age five to 11) I allowed 40 minutes for each child for a 30-minute piano practice before school (starting at 6:30 a.m., 7:10 a.m. and 7:50 a.m.). In the evening they would each do a good 10 minute practice (which was more relaxed, and often extended to 15 minutes)—just scales, once through newest piece, plus duets or jazzy piece. I was delighted if two out of three of our 30-minute practices were "good."

Strategies to make practice more successful

Strategies vary according to the age of the child. However, some strategies work for **all ages of children**:

- Charts to tick, to add stickers to, or to colour
- Immediate rewards—ticks in boxes, stickers, paper chain or chocolate buttons, awarded according to length of practice or for each completed task
- Collective rewards—stickers and ticks turn into bigger rewards—small toys, family outing, pocket money
- Light a candle for the duration of the practice—a reward when the candle has burnt down.
- Child knows what is to be covered during the practice session.
- Targets/incentives—concert, wanting to surprise or impress the teacher
- Praise, praise, praise—everyone responds more positively to a suggestion for improvement after receiving praise.
- Encourage child: "Do you remember two weeks ago you couldn't play this bit at all? Now it sounds lovely!"
- Make child laugh—from a silly intentional mistake by parent, a joke, stuffed animal, spontaneous cuddle, followed by tickles.



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- At beginning of practice, tell child some good news—grandparents coming to visit, an exciting project, plans for birthday celebration or family outing, etc.
- Play duets with child.

With **younger children**, practices need to be presented as fun activities which children want to come back to. Focus during a practice is more important than the length of a practice.

- Tasks are presented as games or challenges.
- Use of props such as cuddly toys, puzzles, dice, even a timer
- Add a piece to a jigsaw, colour part of a picture or do a dot-to-dot for every ten repetitions of a small assignment.
- Count down towards zero for repetitions; this heightens concentration.
- Child plays to audience (favourite toys, siblings, visiting friends or relatives).
- Parent plays piece badly and child teaches parent.
- Invent and sing silly words to the piece.
- Child is involved in story line or role play—child plays music while parent tells the story, or child pretends to be his/her favourite character playing a piece.

With **older children**, it is not so much a question of whether the child practises so much as when, how and what to practise.

- Offer some choices in practice, not necessarily what is covered, but the order in which things are covered, or how they are practised, or lucky dip box for review
- Record lessons. Then review and assess them.
- Play games such as swapping hands, improvising.

Helpful ideas from Suzuki Families

Here is a list of ideas and suggestions from Suzuki families. Perhaps you could try one when you need variety for the next practice session.

Charts

Your teacher may have a selection of charts for parents and children to use.

- Practice chart to indicate what is to be covered and what has been covered
- Practice chart to indicate child has done the practice (for collective rewards)
- Review chart for past repertoire
- Attitude chart—a sticker or tick for a cheerful practice

- Triangle chart for each practice point (see illustration). On first day, practise assignment until successful once, then colour circle at top of triangle. On second day, practise assignment until successful twice, and then colour the two circles on second row of triangle. Continue daily for seven days. The assignment should be very short and very specific, e.g., play Twinkle Variation One with finger four stroking well, or play the two notes of a slur strong-soft.

See www.jennymacmillan.co.uk for a selection of practice charts.

Recordings

In addition to daily listening to Suzuki repertoire:

Practice Triangle

Name: _____

Assignment: _____

Date: _____

Triangle chart



Pippa teaching Lisa with Yoko taking notes

- Play along with recordings of the Suzuki repertoire, sometimes one hand alone, sometimes hands together.
- Listen to a piece played by different performers.
- Listen to the original music from which the piece was adapted to the instrument.
- Listen to the piece played on other instruments.
- Parent shows child how much s/he enjoys listening to the piece, or playing or singing it, especially if child is reluctant to practise it.

Fun playing/practising

These ideas are good for well-known repertoire pieces:

- Play blindfolded or with eyes closed or in a darkened room.
- Play with crossed hands.
- Play in the style of an animal or a favourite character.
- Parent and child play together in different ways: each play one hand of a piece; child plays hands together and parent ‘accompanies’ with one hand; play duet arrangement, parent accompanies on another instrument.
- “Funny dip” – cards describing how to play a piece, such as slow as a snail, fast as a cheetah, loud as an elephant

stomping, quiet as a little mouse

- Play a piece in different keys.
- Play a tune written in a major key in a minor key.

Tools and ideas

Further suggestions to aid practice:

- Multi-sensory learning—dancing with the music in order to feel the beat, visualising music with an appropriate picture or photo
- Colour note heads on score to show different dynamics.
- Treasure hunt—Find a raisin or chocolate button for each task completed.
- Abacus for number of repetitions
- Play with different rhythms: dotted, triplets, in the rhythm of a Twinkle variation.
- Play with different articulations—play a legato phrase staccato or double staccato.
- Competition to complete three (or other number) consecutive repetitions of a study point. Child always starts first, so s/he has a chance to win without cheating; if s/he makes a mistake, parent needs to make a smudge, so both start counting from one again.
- Parent challenges child to make bigger or softer sound (child nearly always wins).

- Follow child’s interests: e.g., Football Suzuki – if the task is to play a phrase with perfect legato, child has to play it legato for his team to score a goal, but parent’s team scores if there is a gap in the legato. It helps if the parent can do this in a very lively manner, imitating a sports commentator!

Other useful comments

- Notes from lessons: Write down clearly how many repetitions child promised teacher to do.
- Keep up with review. If child needs to re-learn an old repertoire piece, the practice tends to be unsuccessful and/or unhappy.
- If practice time is limited for any reason, focus only on the points made in the lesson.
- Children get frustrated when asked to stop in the middle of a piece. Agree in advance either to repeat short assignments or to play through the piece, or one followed by the other.
- If dealing with many pieces hands separately, don’t try to do entire pieces—better to do, for example, left hand only for one particular line or even only one or two bars of Alberti bass (but really well); or right hand only of one or two phrases, but with very good singing sound and beautifully shaped dynamics.
- Video child playing a concert piece and watch it together; both make comments. Praise one good point, then suggest one point for improvement. It is especially important for child to say what s/he wants to improve; the point for improvement is written on a flash card and applied next time the piece is played.
- Parents take lessons from the teacher on the Suzuki repertoire and/or know each piece of music in advance of child’s learning it (child’s study points, difficult fingering, new techniques, etc.).
- Cover the most important piece first; if you don’t get to the end of the list, try not to feel bad about it. There is always tomorrow; remember next day to start with the piece that didn’t get done.
- No need always to start with a scale

or sight-reading (though do warm up with either Twinkle variations or variations on a scale); if a practice starts badly, it tends to drag.

- Finish practice with something special—a favorite piece, a concert piece, something jazzy, or a duet.
- Distinguish between *play* and *practice*. Children play for pleasure, for emotional satisfaction; they practise in order to progress, both musically and technically; both are important aspects of children's development.
- Read about the composer; Use *Improve Your Practice* books by Paul Harris; children feel closer to the composer and the repertoire when they know something interesting about the composer.
- Attend a Suzuki workshop.
- Learn from other parents through observing other children's lessons and discussing the issues together.
- Email your teacher with problems.

What to do when your child is trying, but plays a piece poorly, or not as well as previously

Your child is probably aware that the piece didn't go well and is probably disappointed. So empathise and agree with your child, "Isn't it annoying that it wasn't so good today?" Ask your child what s/he thinks it needs (hands separate or slow work or attention to one particular bar, etc.), and agree either to do that immediately, or to add it to the list for the next practice.

But also try to find something to **praise** about the playing. Start with the basics, posture, hand position, finger movements. Even if children are quite advanced, there is no harm in reminding them what progress has been made over the years; they probably remember these things were problematic in the early stages. And the fact that these basics are good even when challenged to play a newer piece shows that these have now become automatic and are done subconsciously, which is just what we are aiming for. Or praise beautiful tone on one particular note, or good rhythm in an awkward bar, good balance between the hands, good speed (at opening, or at end, even if not all the way through!), good contrasts of dynamics, well-shaped phrases, well expressed character/mood of piece. If nothing was good (unlikely, if child was trying), then praise him/her for trying hard, or for persevering and keeping going through to the end.

If the child is not trying, that is a different matter, of course, and care and encouragement are required to help them put in the effort. Perhaps that calls for re-thinking about the time of day for practising. Perhaps your child needs to be put to bed earlier in order to feel fresh in the morning for a relaxed practice. Perhaps the parent is tired and not able to guide the practice in a relaxed frame of mind. More incentives may be required: child play two own choice pieces for visiting grandparents; parent promise to video each repertoire piece after the teacher has heard it in lesson; a small reward for learning the left hand of the next piece perfectly; etc.

Conclusion

Practising with young children is a challenge for parents. The more parents are able to think about practices, preparing



Jenny teaching a piano lesson

for them, planning the outline within which there will be flexibility according to the mood and needs of the child, the more successful practices will be. Every child is different, so the parent will have to work differently with each one. At the same time, children do like to feel firmly guided. They can tell when their parents don't really know what they are doing, such as when parents are vaguely ruminating, "Shall we do this or shall we do that?" as opposed to clearly giving the child a choice: "Would you like to do this first or that first?" The child knows the other will be done afterwards, or the next day.

Huge pleasure can be derived from supervising productive music practices. Regular good-natured work should offer a wonderful opportunity for bonding between parent and child, not to mention the musical progress that is possible when parent and child are working well together. ☞



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