

PRACTICE HABITS

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Playing a musical instrument is a matter of habit. If that sounds like an odd statement, think about driving your car. You get in, fasten your seat belt, adjust the seat and mirrors, and habitually perform all the other little tasks that go into driving: from clutching and shifting to checking your rear view mirror before backing up. You learned long ago to perform these little tasks, and have done them often enough over many years that you no longer give them conscious thought.

Playing an instrument is very similar. On the piano, an octave is always played by an open hand, with the thumb and pinky hitting the two notes that create the octave. It always feels exactly the same, so a pianist's hand begins to open and reach for an octave out of habit when they see one in the music. The oboe reed has to be placed just so in the mouth to create a controlled sound. It feels a certain way when it's in position. After many years of playing, it becomes almost impossible to break that habit and place it incorrectly on the lips. From slide positions on the trombone to left-hand positions on string instruments, chords on the guitar, and reaches for the cymbals of a drum set, and so on, all musicians' bodies rely on habits, or what many people refer to as "muscle memory," to play their instruments and sing.

FOSTERING HEALTHY AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE HABITS

The habits or muscle memory required to play an instrument at a high level can only be developed over time and, at that, only if the student practices well. Effective practice includes warm-ups to get muscles ready for the workout they're going to receive on the instrument. Just as an athlete warms up to protect muscles from injury and increase the accuracy of the task they're about to perform, musicians do the same. Warm-ups not only prepare the embouchure, hand, and finger muscles for the fine, precise work they're about to do, but they also ready larger muscle groups for the job of supporting an instrument, and, for singers, wind players, and brass players, supporting air flow.

Warming up is an essential part of practicing. Both mind and body need to be loosened up and focused on the task at hand. Your child's private teacher will be able to map out a warm-up plan for your child. After a few days, you will recognize the warm-ups for what they are and the actual practice for what it is. Warm-ups usually begin slowly and deliberately, working on large muscle groups first, then progressing to smaller and smaller muscle groups. Each instrument or voice type has its own set of issues, so each one will also have its own set of warm-ups. Similarly, each student will have different strengths and weaknesses, some of which can be addressed through specific warm-ups. Many teachers also recommend a few minutes of a cool-down routine at the end of each practice session, so that the player ends the session playing in a relaxed and comfortable fashion. Both warm-ups and cool-downs are part of the series of effective habits your child needs to develop as a player or singer. They are habits you can support and monitor.

Developing mindful warm-up and practice habits will not only help your child succeed on their chosen instrument, it will help prevent playing- or singing-related injuries as well. In addition, effective practice habits foster the self-control needed to *limit* the time one spends at any given task, which can be as important as the discipline to perform that task in the first place.

HABITS BEYOND MUSIC

Practicing is, in itself, a habit. The simple fact of setting aside time every day for a diligent, focused practice session, or perhaps multiple sessions, fosters a strong sense of personal discipline in music students. That discipline becomes a part of their approach to other non-musical endeavors, making a positive impact throughout their lives. Music students who spend their practice time breaking pieces into component parts that they can work out and master one at a time are not easily intimidated or overwhelmed by large projects or tasks outside of music. In addition, the musical idea of building skill upon skill over time translates well to areas such as math and languages, and the organizational skills students learn in prioritizing and planning practice sessions transfer well to non-musical areas.

We [musicians] all know musicians who went on to become doctors, lawyers etc. People who have studied music have highly developed problem-solving skills and adaptive minds. They are in the habit of being demanding of themselves, as well as capable and comfortable working with discernable standards.

~Don Sipe, trumpeter, president of Omicron Artist Management, Inc.