

PRACTICE PLANS, GOALS, AND TECHNIQUES

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Nothing sets a person up for success in an endeavor quite like having a plan—and this absolutely includes musicians and their practice sessions. Your child’s music teacher will be able to create a daily practice plan for your child. This plan is a roadmap of the daily practice session, from warm-up to cool-down, including how much time should be spent on technique, etudes, aural skills, solo repertoire, and band or orchestra music. Having a practice plan, which may vary from day to day, helps the child develop the ability to break down tasks into component parts and helps them learn to prioritize.

A PARENT’S ROLE

You can help with your own version of a practice plan. If your child is struggling with a certain piece, or is feeling stressed about an upcoming concert or competition, you can help by creating a plan for their approach to the problem. Have them identify the spots that need the most work and lay out the plan to give that music the most time. Setting weekly goals can also help them experience small successes on the way to the performance.

SETTING GOALS

Goals are an essential part of practicing an instrument or singing. Long-range goals, such as winning an audition to play with the local youth orchestra or the top high school band, are powerful motivators. Shorter-range goals, such as achieving top marks at solo and ensemble contest or being cast as the lead in the school musical, provide great benchmarks. Doing well at next week’s lesson is an equally valid and motivating goal, as is playing well in band, or succeeding at a chair-placement test or a chair-placement challenge. If your child achieves their musical goals, you will have to watch to make sure they are handling the resulting praise with good grace.

DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

The flip side of the goals issue is that your child will probably not achieve all of their musical goals. The day will come for most music students when they don't score the marks they had hoped for on an RCM Examination, don't achieve the Solo and Ensemble Contest ranking they hoped for, or don't win the ensemble audition or chair-placement test despite disciplined preparation. At this point, it is up to you and your child's teacher to provide perspective, encouragement, and support as your child learns to deal with the disappointment that follows missing a goal. Dealing with that sort of disappointment is a part of adult life, which means that these are valuable lessons. All of us have experienced some disappointment in our lives and careers. This is a chance to find some good in those less-than-great moments by sharing them with your child and pointing out that everyone has disappointments—what matters is dusting oneself off, learning from the experience, and carrying on.

PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

At the risk of advocating the "Think System" from *The Music Man*, it needs to be said that there is actually value in silent practice. Looking at the music, counting, and imagining the sound can be a great tool for understanding what's printed on the page without the complications of embouchure, breathing, fingerings, bowing, slide positions, or whatever else the instrument requires.

Also helpful to students learning a new piece of music is the process of counting or talking through the rhythms and note names of a piece before playing. In the early days of learning to play an instrument, the tempo, rhythms, key signature, notes, and all of the other markings in the music can seem like a dense and complex code to a child. They can also seem indecipherable to an adult who doesn't read music. Add to that the complexity of the instrument itself, and you have a lot of information to wrangle. Separating the information into components can be really helpful for children as they are learning to play. By learning and mastering one component at a time, children experience a sense of accomplishment with each step of the process, and are more likely to learn the music correctly and accurately. Most private teachers have a preferred method for counting and talking through pieces, which they teach to their students. You can ask your child's teacher how they approach such things, and you can probably find that system penciled into your child's music.

Another helpful technique in the process of learning to play a wind or string instrument is holding the instrument and simply fingering a passage. This gives the player a chance to concentrate on just their hands—no breathing, embouchure, or bowing to think about. The process helps the student to get comfortable with the feel of the individual notes and the feel of the complete passage they're working on.

Moving the instrument slightly, while silently fingering a passage, allows the player to see their hands and fingers in action. Seeing which finger is lagging or anticipating a fingering shift can be revelatory and can save a lot practice time. Piano students use a similar technique, moving back and forth between just a few chords, or back and forth over a difficult switch in hand position just to make the feel of the move familiar.

Teachers may also encourage altering the rhythms in passages that a student is working on. You may hear your child playing the same passage over and over with slightly altered note values. This technique helps get difficult passages under the student's fingers.

You will come to recognize the sounds of productive, focused practice wafting through the house, and to differentiate those sounds from distracted and aimless playing. You can help keep your child on track by gently redirecting them when their focus wanes. Sometimes just a word to point them back in the right direction does the trick. Other times a quick break for a beverage or a little snack can refresh them and give them the energy to keep working. The point is that you're showing your child that you're paying attention to what they're doing, even if you're not in the room with them, and that you care enough to support their musical endeavors.