

PRACTICE AND PARENTS

Elaine Schmidt

I was obliged to work hard. Anyone who works as hard as I did can achieve the same results.

~Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), composer, organist, and harpsichordist

Some stories get repeated so often and by so many people, that it's hard to pin down exactly what happened or what was said. One such legendary story finds world-renowned cellist Pablo Casals injuring his hand while rock climbing. He is reported to have taken one look at his mangled hand and then said to his companions, "Thank heavens, I'll never have to play that cello again."

Practice is work, which was the point of Casals's comment. It's work that begins when a person first takes up an instrument or decides to sing, and it continues as long as a person intends to make music. The better one becomes, the more one has to practice to build and maintain skills. Students practice and so do professional musicians. The difference is that professional musicians practice longer and harder than young students do.

As the parents of a music student, one of your tasks is to help your child learn to practice well. It's tough for kids to see the bigger picture, so it helps if you can. Your child is not just learning the music that sits on the stand in front of them as they practice, they're learning the discipline of working regularly and incrementally at something that's difficult, and they're learning to isolate problems and devise methods for solving them. In short, they are learning skills that will be valuable throughout their lives. It's worth pointing out that the process of identifying a problem, working out a method for fixing that problem, going through the process of fixing it, and then checking your results, is the basis for several lucrative, corporate, quality initiatives. Musicians just know this process as practicing.

A PARENT'S ROLE IN THE PRACTICE PROCESS

Practice can't be rushed or simplified. Unlike a lot of what we are all asked to do today, practice can't be accomplished through shortcuts or multitasking. However, it can be accomplished efficiently and pleasantly—and that's where parents can help.

Your role in your child's practice sessions and scheduling will change with your child's age, ability, and motivation. If you have a child in an early-childhood method, such as Suzuki, you will have to be part of every lesson and practice session to help your child learn to practice.

It's not a matter of time at first—it's a matter of repetitions. We specify right from the start that a student has to do this thing ten times per day and do this thing twenty-five times per day. Children take great satisfaction in spending this quality time with their parents, and so do parents. When the child reaches age twelve or thirteen, we say goodbye to the parents in the lessons and practice sessions.

~Mimi Zweig, professor of violin, Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University; director of the Indiana University String Academy

Your child's teacher will give you guidelines for the length of time your child should be practicing. In the early days on an instrument, the teacher may suggest a single, fifteen-minute session every day, or a couple of ten-minute sessions. The reason for these suggestions may be the child's attention span, if they are quite young, or it may have to do with developing muscle control if they are older.

TIME FOR PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The embouchure required for playing any reed or brass instruments can only be developed and strengthened over time. In the first weeks a child is playing one of these instruments, they simply don't have the control over their facial muscles to play for long periods of time. Regardless of the instrument your child plays, their teacher may give them practice aids or exercises to help them with issues of posture, embouchure, bowing, etc. If your child is at an age that still requires you to sit and practice with them, it's up to you to make sure they use these aids as intended. If your child is older, you can volunteer to check on them periodically to make sure they remember the posture instructions or other directions as they play.

For flutists the problem in the early days of playing is that the flute takes a tremendous amount of air and there is no resistance when the child blows. Combine that with the fact that the child's embouchure isn't strong enough to allow efficient use of air, and you have a good chance that the beginning flutist will hyperventilate, or at least get a little woozy, if they try to play for too long. Singers will always have time restrictions placed on their practice sessions. Singers simply can't put in the amount of time for daily practice that instrumentalists can.

DEGREES OF PROGRESS: DRAMATIC AND INCREMENTAL

In the first weeks of your child's musical career, practically every day will bring a better sound, a new note learned, more control—evident progress of some sort. In the course of a very short period of time your child will progress from not knowing where on the instrument to put their hands to playing a recognizable tune or two. It's more than okay to be impressed by this progress and to encourage and praise it. Make a point, often, to express and how proud and impressed you with their progress.

The problem comes some months later when they are still making progress, but it begins to feel more incremental than dramatic. Once they are playing tunes on their instrument and perhaps playing in the band or orchestra, chances are good that their practice and lessons will focus on relatively fine points of playing. They'll work on scales, exercises for sound control, rhythm reading, and so on. There will never be a time of dramatic progress like there was in the first few weeks they were playing. Your job is to continue the encouragement and praise and to pay attention to the progress, even if it's not as dramatic as it was at the beginning. Their teacher will also do a lot of this, but your support and attention will also matter tremendously. We are never too old to relish making our parents proud.

It's often helpful to remind students that their success on their instrument or in their vocal study is theirs—they own it. A teacher can only give them information and direction and a parent can only supply the tools and lessons, and remind them to practice. It's the student who does the work and makes the progress.

I always tell my trumpet students, "I'm your guide. You really teach yourself through the hours and hours you spend in practice.

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