

Practice Challenges: Getting Started, Working Together, and Ending Gracefully. Ideas For Parents

By Amy Matherly

In the Suzuki approach to learning to play an instrument, parents and children work closely together. There are many benefits to this, and many challenges. As a parent helping your child, you know that home practice is essential to success and that it is your responsibility to make sure that it happens and is productive. No matter how skilled your teacher is, how beautiful an instrument you have or how much your child wants to be able to do this, he will not make much progress without regular practice. Here are some solutions to common problems that I hope will help make your practice sessions effective and enjoyable.

Getting started

My child complains, stalls, cries, and/or hides when it's time to practice.

Establish the Habit

The biggest hurdle is forming the habit of daily practice. When we no longer ask the question, "Do I have to practice today?" we eliminate the internal resistance and conflict that accompanies that question.

In *The Power of Habit*¹, Charles Duhigg breaks down a habit into three components: a cue, a routine, and a reward. Once we develop a craving for the reward, we are more inclined to repeat the routine and a habit is formed. Apply this to your practice:

- The cue might be the time of day, an activity that comes just before - perhaps enjoying an after-school snack, or something ceremonial like donning the 'comfy practice slippers'.
- Practice no matter what obstacles are present. If your child is really tired, make it short. If he is sick have him air bow a piece in bed or do some active listening. If he is away from home, practice via Skype or Facetime (make sure he brings the practice slippers).
- The 'reward' should be a good feeling that is associated with the accomplishment rather than a prize or bribe. Keep it simple. A hug or a 'good work!' is a reward. Place a sticker on a practice calendar or a new piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

Inspire

Get your child thinking about his music in a positive way before beginning the practice session.

- Listen to or watch a video of a piece that your child is working on.
- Talk about something that went well or was fun at a recent lesson or group class.

Create Atmosphere

Make your practice space inviting and comfortable with art, special lighting – maybe a practice candle, a plant that can flourish from the beautiful music, or stuffed animals that want to listen.

Challenge

I love the television show American Ninja Warrior² and find that students of all ages are inspired by the stories of the contestants, their rigorous training schedules, good sportsmanship, and resolve to work harder and try again when faced with defeat. Encourage your child to be courageous, fast and strong.

- *“How quickly can you get ready?”* Set a timer and keep track on a chart.
- Keep a record of consecutive days – *“Wow, you’ve practiced 63 days in a row. Today you go for 64!”*
- Put together a ‘Ninja Warrior’ board game – each item on the practice list an obstacle to be mastered.

Working Together

My child doesn’t want me to help her.

Try a little psychology

This is probably because she doesn’t want to feel criticized or babied by you. Although you must be a parent with discipline and rules, firmly enforcing the law of daily practice, you can soften your approach to that of ‘learning partner’ once the practice is underway. As your child’s practice helper, you need to know a lot and yet be tactful when sharing that knowledge.

- Collaborate, ask questions, let your child help you.
- Be enthusiastic and playful.
- Refer to the teacher as the expert. *“How did Miss Amy say to do this? Let’s check the notes.”*

Practice learning together

Give your child the opportunity to get comfortable working with you on some lower stakes activities:

- Play the ‘The Cup Game’ from the movie Pitch Perfect³ – you can find instructions on YouTube.
- Explore Kids Shenanigans⁴ published by Klutz Press - paper airplanes or hand whistling anyone?
- Let your child teach you things that they have learned such as karate forms or songs.

Be specific about each task

“The assignment is to play Twinkle and get the 2nd finger in tune. Miss Amy asked me to move the bow for you while you listen to whether or not your 2nd finger is high enough.”

I’m not sure what to practice.

Take clear notes at the private lesson and follow the lesson format at home.
Have this be the norm so that when you need novelty, you can do something else.
If you are unsure about something, ask your teacher for clarification.

The practice quickly turns negative. My child becomes frustrated and I become aggravated.

Ease into it

Start with something that your child can do well to build his confidence – work up to the more challenging tasks.

Don’t skip steps

When learning a new piece, go through all of the steps that the teacher presented rather than jumping to where you ended during the last practice session. Although your child may insist that he ‘already knows this’, working through each step will solidify and strengthen each skill and she will have a much better chance of achieving a correct rendition when putting it all together. This approach is much more gratifying and productive than playing with errors and having to go back.

An example: Oh Come Little Children
Listen to and then sing it so that your child recalls the melody
Practice the bowing in the air and then on the open E string
Review the notes by playing them pizzicato
Play it

Talk about The Learning Process

“We have to be brave in order to learn new things. At first we won’t be able to do the new thing. We will make mistakes and learn from them. If we keep at it, it will get easier.”

Balance

Bring balance to your practice sessions by alternating focused work with lighter activities:

- Take a yoga or exercise break
- Give your child some say, “*Let’s finish working on this and then have you choose the next piece.*”
- Let them perform: “*Will you play Minuet One for me? It’s my favorite.*”
Listen and enjoy.

Ending Gracefully

There is too much to do!

Always go for quality over quantity - take more than one day to get through the assignment list if necessary.

End the session after a successful or fun moment so that is what your child remembers when it’s time to practice the next day.

My child is anxious to be done and keeps asking about it.

Put the practice list where your child can see it and let her check off each task after you complete it.

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I hope that these ideas are helpful and wish you many successful practice sessions! Phillip Toshio Sudo, author of *Zen Guitar*⁵, advises us to ‘Zoom In and Zoom Out’. Changing perspective as needed can be very helpful.

- If you are unfocused and disorganized – zoom in close, pay attention to details. Improve one thing or go for one productive practice session.
- If you're overwhelmed and discouraged - look at the big picture. Remember why you're doing this and look at how far you’ve come.

Notes

1. Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, (New York: Random House 2012)
Page 19
2. *American Ninja Warrior*, (NBC 2012)
3. *Pitch Perfect*, (Directed by Jason Moore 2012)
4. John Cassidy, *Kids Shenanigans*, (California: Klutz Press 1992)
5. Phillip Toshio Sudo, *Zen Guitar*, (New York: Simon and Schuster 1997)
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