

How to Help Your Child Practice at Home

The most important part of music study takes place at home, not at the lesson. At home, the student tries out new ideas, plays his assignment as specified, and has fun experimenting.

What Practice Is

Knowing what practice is and why it's valuable will assist you in helping your child make the most of his time at the instrument. It also will guide you in dealing with the resistance that will happen on occasion, even with the most dedicated child.

Research shows that maximum retention occurs if repetition--that is, practice--takes place within 24 hours or less. The retention rate is approximately 90%. If repetition does not occur until 48 hours later (skip a day of practice), the retention drops off drastically, as the graph is a curve rather than a straight line. By 72 hours (skip two days), retention is virtually zero. (Material that is already learned is retained longer, of course. I speak here of new material, such as a new piece or a new section of piece begun previously.)

Your child will be very frustrated with his ability to carry out the lesson assignment at home the longer he waits between practice sessions. Therefore, daily practice will net your child the most progress for his effort and will keep frustration to a minimum.

Practice seven days a week is not realistic for every student or every family, however. The student might like "a day off." If he practices six days a week, his tasks will be well-reinforced and one 48-hour gap will not affect his overall retention significantly. (The day after or before the lesson is never a good choice for the free day.)

Home practice is also a time to experiment. After he completes his assignment, encourage your child to explore. Perhaps he can pick out a tune by ear, play a song he already knows but in a different way, or make up his own song. Playing an old song or two is fun; this is also a good way to reinforce your child's progress and point out that his efforts are bearing fruit: "Do you remember back at Christmas when this song was so hard for you?" Looking ahead in his materials is another productive activity: your child can see how much of the upcoming material he already knows and can challenge himself to figure out the rest.

Finally, home practice is a time for the family to participate in the child's music study. This can take the form of "family concerts" after dinner, playing duets with another family member, or participating in the games the teacher assigns (to drill on note-reading or counting).

Your child's teacher will have recommendations to make home practice successful, so be sure to follow them. Here are some other ideas you might want to try.

Help with the Lesson Assignment

Your child's teacher will let you know exactly what you need to do to assist actively in home practice. The teacher may ask you to watch the student's hand position as he plays to make sure he maintains the correct one or he may ask you to count out loud for your child. A youngster may have card games or board games or other fun activities to carry out at home with a partner. Children respond best to a lesson assignment that is very specific ("play lines 3 and 4, hand together, 4 times) rather than general ("work on this"). If your child's teacher does not write the assignment out in this way, ask him to do so. Your child will then pay attention to carrying out the assignment rather than focusing on a specified number of minutes spent at the piano ("clock-watching"). This kind of practice plan allows you to divide home practice into several segments, if necessary. The child also sees precisely what he still has to accomplish and will know when he is finished.

With young children, you may have to be involved directly for the entire practice session at first. Even after some months of study, your help may be needed for most of the practice time. Do not expect your child to carry out his practice entirely by himself until he is about 10 years old. (Yes, piano study is a significant commitment for the family!)

Many children like to have a parent keep them company while they practice. Even if the child doesn't need your sustained participation, he may crave your presence because he's lonely in the piano room all by himself. Don't imply by words or body language that you'd rather be (or "should be") somewhere else. That attitude is an eloquent negative. Use your "keeping company time" to read for pleasure, catch up on professional reading, balance the checkbook, or simply relax and enjoy your child's accomplishments. Keep suggestions or criticism to yourself, however, unless the child asks for your help. The teacher will work with your child to correct errors. After your child has left home, I promise you will look back on any time you invest in this way and feel that it was more than amply rewarded. Your child will have fond memories, too. And remember that parental involvement and commitment are vital to the child's continued interest.

Divide Practice Time

With today's busy families, it often works well to divide practice session into two or more segments, particularly with a young child who is still developing his attention span. Two 15-minute practices--or even three 10-minute sessions--can be more productive than one 30-minute

sitting. Divide the material for variety, too. For example, if there are two songs, two games, and a technique exercise, work at one song the first time and the other song at the second practice time, playing a game each session and working on half the technical material.

At Home Immediately After the Lessons

If students (adults as well as children!) did the following after each lesson, they would find their progress really accelerating.

After you return home, sit down with your child and play through his lesson assignment one time. This should consume 10 minutes at most. For each part of the assignment, ask your child to describe what he is supposed to do and why and then have him play it for you. This will acquaint you with what you should be hearing and how you should be hearing it, and your child will know that you are aware of precisely what the teacher has requested. Should there be questions, call the teacher right away for clarification rather than let the child ignore an element of his assignment all week (or worse: do it incorrectly and later have to un-learn!).

Your child reaps several things from this post-lesson review. It is a tangible reminder that you support his efforts and are vitally interested in the content of what he is doing. Another benefit is that the immediate repetition of the assigned material ensures almost 100% retention of what the teacher said at the lesson.

If you like, count this session as a day's practice, so your child may have "a day off" another time later in the week.

Ideally, both Mother and Father sit down with the child to preview the upcoming week's activities, but in the real world a consistent commitment from one parent is sufficient. It doesn't have to be the same parent each time, either.

A Consistent Practice Time

Most students benefit from a consistent piano practice time. Adults find a routine helps them shoehorn in all they must do; children draw security from routine.

I tell all my students that schoolwork is first priority. If there is a large assignment that evening, there may be no time for practice because schoolwork is most important. After schoolwork comes piano playing, however. When that is complete, then there's time to play outside, use the telephone, watch TV, or whatever else they'd like to do. It's important that children know that piano study falls right under schoolwork in the day's hierarchy. They should understand that some days their homework load and their piano time may preclude most or all of their playtime. Not every day, surely, but sometimes. They should understand and accept this before study begins.

Of course, children may "unwind" by having a snack or changing clothes, but right after that, it's time to hit the books. No getting sidetracked with a magazine or playing with a friend.

Discuss with your child's teacher whether this might be a useful philosophy for your family.

At-Home Quiet Zone

It goes without saying that other family members should not be in the piano room during practice time. Nor should they be causing a racket elsewhere in the house. Not only is the noise itself distracting, but your child's curiosity will be piqued by the possibility that something interesting is going on elsewhere and he will be distracted and restless. Most families find that practice time for one child is a perfect homework time (or story time) for another.

Reminders

Occasionally you may have to remind your child to practice. No matter his level of interest in music study, he is only human and some days he will want to do something else first or skip practice altogether. A regular practice time and at-home quiet zone helps, as does an obvious interest and commitment from the parent(s).

If you constantly experience trouble inducing your child to practice (tantrums, tears, shouting), something is wrong. Your child may not have thought out the time and effort necessary for learning to play a musical instrument. Or he may have changed his mind when he discovered it's not like TV: with piano study he is a participant; with TV he is only a spectator. Another possibility is that he has some other problem which is preventing him from feeling his effort is producing a worthwhile result (a sibling is being a pest during practice time, the other parent is making disparaging remarks about piano study). Consult the teacher. If this does not ameliorate the problem, consider changing teachers, changing instruments, or looking to another of the fine arts (dance, theater, painting, etc.).

Piano study isn't easy--if it were, everyone would be doing it--but it should always be satisfying. copyright 1996, Martha Beth Lewis, Ph.D.

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