

9 Ways to Help Kids Practice

Teach kids the value of practice and turn them into give-it-their-best achievers who take pleasure and pride in their accomplishments.

By Jeff Breidenberg

Few kids like to work to be good at something. As adults, we know that the accomplished people who inspire and guide us and our kids achieved skills through passion and diligent practice. Sometimes, it's hard to convey that idea to kids, and harder still to avoid being frustrated into arguing with a child who seems to dread practice. So what works? How can you get reluctant, frustrated youngsters to practice the skill they'll be proud of in the future? The answers involve some work on your part -- and nary a raised voice.

Make It Fun

Expand your child's concept of the activity by helping her see the fun side of it. If she takes ballet lessons, take her to stage performances or watch [DVDs](#) of professional productions together. Read books about little-girl dancers and treat her to pretty ballet accessories -- tutus and chiffon skirts. Stacy DeBroff, a parenting author and founder of the online community MomCentral.com, says silly games and experimentation can break up the tedium of practice. For instance, if your child is going to play a musical piece four times through, have him play it once normally, once standing on one leg, another time while looking out the [window](#), and a final time with his eyes closed.

Point Out the Payoff

Rather than emphasize a performer's "moment of perfection" -- the musical solo or home run -- give your child glimpses of the hard work that leads up to perfection. Scout out professionals willing to visit your child to talk about how their practice routines led to the thrill of performance. Encourage your child to read biographical sketches of great musicians, journalists, athletes, or artists so they can understand that top performers are real people who had to struggle to develop their talents. Common daily occurrences offer opportunities to teach about patience and long-term gratification. Has your child mastered a video game? Say to her, "The first time you played that game, did you score as many points as you did the tenth time?" If you spot a particularly nice flower [garden](#) in the neighborhood, ask, "What steps are involved in achieving that?" This will lead to a discussion of the unseen work of planning, research, shopping, planting, [watering](#), and weeding. If your favorite professional baseball team performs poorly in a game, comment, "This doesn't mean they'll quit playing -- they'll probably get some extra batting practice."

Let Him Choose

Don't demand that your child become passionate about any pursuit when you can expose him to a variety of activities and let him decide which direction to take. There's a fine line between letting a child give up an activity prematurely and letting him quit once he's given it a fair shot and is no longer interested. As a parent, you need to let go of the "what will other parents think?" mentality. That's too much angst for some kids. If it feels too pressured and frustrating, they might rebel.

Help -- Within Limits

If you plan to observe your child practicing at home -- say, playing violin in the family room -- getting involved can be constructive. But there are limits. Ask your child's instructor for guidance. There will be some matters that you can closely supervise, and there will be others that children need to work through on their own. Don't pounce on every mistake your child makes during practice. Obviously, his skill is a work in progress; wincing at every sour note will only frustrate him. It's better to show enthusiasm for effort and achievement. But avoid dominating the practice sessions -- offer your help if he seems frustrated or asks for it, then praise him profusely for trying his best.

more ways to encourage practice

Try "Pay to Play"

It may surprise some parents to learn that kids will pay -- at least in part -- when they become passionate about developing a particular skill. If your child wants to focus on a particular activity, make him a "stakeholder" in the venture. Determine what costs seem reasonable to your child and his activity -- paying for extra song books or instrument maintenance, for example. A similar approach could work on more costly sports equipment, such as skis or golf clubs. Because they're financially involved, the kids become more motivated and committed to practice.

Control the Environment

The quieter and more peaceful the environment, the more your child can focus on practice. Whacking tennis balls against the [garage door](#) or practicing free throws in the [driveway](#) may not be the best venue if siblings are getting in the way or neighborhood friends are distracting him. Arranging time at a local school gym or court, or even practicing at a local park may be the key. Similarly, a young musician needs a distraction-free retreat in the home for practice. Make sure the [TV](#) and video games are off, and other distractions -- siblings included -- are removed from the room.

Schedule Practice Time

Despite the best intentions, your child might never quite get around to practicing. Scheduling regular in-home practice ensures that time is set aside for this priority. Schedule practice for times when your child is usually at her best -- not worn out, cranky, or sleepy. Your child might prefer to work straight through her entire practice time in one shot -- say, 30 minutes -- or play two 15-minute sessions with a break in the middle. Let your child decide.

Offer Rewards -- Carefully

Treats for practice don't necessarily create real motivation -- the drive to develop a talent just for love of the activity. A better alternative: Occasionally provide a treat after the practice -- spontaneously. This way, the good feeling of an [ice cream](#) cone is connected with the practice, but the student didn't work through the practice thinking that he was getting paid for it.

Set Incremental Goals

Practicing toward a large goal, such as mastering an entire song on the piano or memorizing a complete martial arts routine, can be overwhelming to kids. So set smaller goals for each day's practice. On piano, this might mean stretching the fingers a bit farther to hit the desired keys. In baseball, it might mean practicing a swing with a different grip on the bat. Small goals add up. Soon you'll hear your child saying, "Wow, I did better today than I did yesterday." That's the first step toward helping kids see practice less as a way to achieve perfection and more as a method of indulging their passion and pleasure.

