

## Ability Development vs. Inability Development (Do the Math)

Dr. Suzuki called his method of education “Ability Development.” In order to develop ability, you have to listen and practice every day. If you miss a day, lose about half what you achieved the day before. If you miss two, you lose 75-80%. It’s kind of like your take home-pay: there’s gross and there’s net.

It takes at least 200 repetitions for an average four-year-old to achieve conscious competence over making a bow hold.

Billy is four. He and his mom practise every day. At the second lesson, the teacher showed them how to make a bow hold correctly. Billy and his mom do fifteen bow holds every day, and by next lesson he is making a pretty good bow hold, with help. One week later he can do it all by himself. Two weeks later he has achieved unconscious competence holding and moving the bow and has moved on to playing rhythms on open strings.

Susie and her mom practise twice a week. They do fifteen bow holds each practice, but because the skill was not reinforced the next day, it is as if they only accomplished only five each practice. At this rate, it will take Susie 20 weeks to acquire a reliable bow hold. After two weeks, Susie’s mom has trouble getting her to practice. Susie reasons that it doesn’t happen every day, so why does it have to happen THIS day? When she does practice she finds it difficult to focus, because that skill has not had enough repetition either. After three weeks, Susie is getting frustrated because it seems no matter how she tries, she can’t manage to make that darned bow hold right. After all, she’s made 90 of them, but it’s like she’s only ever made 30. Her mom is getting frustrated because Susie can’t seem to focus well on the task at hand. After six weeks (60 net repetitions) Susie’s mom goes to the teacher and tells her that Susie is getting bored, it is time now for her to advance. Two weeks later (80 net repetitions) Susie’s mom again urges the teacher to let her advance.

Against her better judgement, the teacher allows Susie to play rhythms on open strings, even though she still can’t reliably make a bow hold. Now Susie has two skills to build simultaneously. Susie eagerly plays open strings, but can’t make the bow go straight because a) she still can’t reliably achieve an ergonomically efficient bow hold, and b) she doesn’t get enough repetitions to build this skill either. This skill seems even more difficult than the last one. Another six weeks go by, and Susie’s mom urges the teacher to let Susie begin using her fingers.

By Christmas, Billy is balancing the violin beautifully, has a good bow hold, can play Twinkle variation 1 through and is working on variation 2. Susie is still trying to build basic skills like focus, holding her violin up, holding the bow correctly, and keeping her bow straight. By June, Billy is playing Allegro with lovely tone, good intonation, no mistakes, and balanced posture. Part way through the next year, he starts Book Two.

It takes Susie four years to finish Book One. Her pieces are full of mistakes, she can’t manage to make a reliably good sound, and her mom and her teacher are still harping on making a nice bow hold. She doesn’t enjoy her music but her mom says she has to do it. She has adopted a coping strategy of shutting down and not trying because she has learned from experience that effort doesn’t lead to success. Her mom has come to the conclusion that Billy is “exceptional” She and Susie continue because Dr. Suzuki says that “every child can learn music.”

The teacher swears to herself that she will never let this happen again. The next September, Johnny and Melinda begin lessons. Johnny’s Dad can only practice with him twice a week. Melinda and her mom practice for ten minutes every day after breakfast. You finish the story.