

## The Parent-Child Relationship

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'I know how to nurture my child by love. But how do I get him to practise?' Parents often feel that these two requirements of the Suzuki Method present them with a contradiction. 'What do I do when he refuses to practise? Do I force him? Is that nurturing him with love?'

The basis of the parent-child relationship, or of any human relationship, should be mutual respect. For too long, respect was a one-way street. Parents demanded respect from their children, but didn't feel obliged to consider the child's feelings or wishes.

Today the pendulum sometimes swings too far the other way. Parents feel they have to follow the child's every lead and indulge every whim for fear of repressing him or losing his love.

The ideal is for the parent to respect what is highest and best in the child's character, not to indulge what is petty and capricious. Parents who are firm and give their child loving guidance earn the child's respect. They also have a right to insist that the child treats respectfully the serious and noble work they are undertaking together, using the development of the child's character to the fullest and best, enabling the child to realise his potential for achievement and independence. The ultimate aim isn't to dominate the child, but to liberate him.

What is liberation? Maria Montessori, another great educator and champion of the child, said: 'It is not possible to speak of free choice when all kinds of external stimuli attract a child at the same time and, having no will power, he responds to every call . . .' This child is not free. 'He is . . . a slave to superficial sensations.'

Most children have some modes of behaviour that are neither attractive nor helpful to their development. A woman who saw me hugging a little pupil of mine whose behaviour was, more often than not, silly and irritating, said: 'You must be a saint! I don't see how you could hold that dreadful child.' She didn't see what I was seeing. I, too, saw the child's behaviour as undesirable, but I didn't see the child as undesirable. I truly feel all children are wonderful, almost magical people, and of a higher order than adults. I believe with Wordsworth that children are born 'trailing clouds of glory'.

Bad behaviour is the dross that hides the gold. Not to see the gold in the child is to stunt it irrevocably. It's like depriving a plant of sunlight and when it fails to bloom to say: 'See, I told you it was no good.'

Parents are right to fear that to dominate the child will crush his spirit. They should also fear that to leave a child without guidance and correction is to leave him undeveloped or badly developed.

Correction, criticism and expectation should have only one aim — to elevate the child. . . to remove the dross. They should never be used to hurt, or humiliate. We must help the child to develop concentration and regular work habits so that he can progress. This leads to ability and ability leads to self-respect and independence. To me this is the great aim of the Suzuki Method. The 'perk' is that the child can also play the violin.

Back to our original question: 'But how do I get him to practise?' This is something that parents have to work out for themselves in terms of what is compatible with their own natures and what works best with their own child. However, there are some guidelines that many parents have found helpful:

*Have a regular practice time.* This eliminates the 'Shall we practise now?' problem. . . it's 8am (or whatever) so of course we practise. Don't answer the telephone, or be available to anyone else during this time. I had four 'Suzuki children' of my own to practise with. Each child knew that they wouldn't dare to interrupt when I was practising with another. Each child's practice time was sacred.

*Make practice an inevitable part of your child's daily routine.* It should be as regular and natural as brushing your teeth, eating meals, etc.

*Enjoy the process and take seriously what you are trying to achieve.* Don't call the child to practice in a weary or angry tone of voice. Speak with enthusiasm and pleasant anticipation. Don't think his efforts are 'cute'. That's condescending.

*Respect the child's achievements.* Playing the violin is complex. Acknowledge the many skills the child has acquired before leaping in to correct a fault, e.g. 'Bow hold is so good, can we get the left-hand shape just as good?'

*Respect yourself.* Don't put up with any nonsense and don't feel guilty about it. You are doing this for your child. You are a caring parent who is putting a lot of time, effort and money into this study. You have a right to insist that your child makes the most of it. My two younger children went through a period of playing me up during practice. Finally I told them firmly to put their violins in rest position, bow, and say: 'Thank you for giving me your valuable time. I will try to be worthy of it.' At the end of practice they had to bow and say: 'Thank you for helping me.' This also had the effect of reminding me to conduct the practice in a way that was worthy of thanks. Be on the side of what's best in the child. I have never met a child that preferred a person who indulged his immature behaviour.

*When correcting, use a friendly matter-of-fact tone rather than an angry or critical one.* A three-year-old pupil said to me: 'No, I don't want to,' just to see what would happen. Without any change in my cordial manner, I said: 'Annie, when your violin teacher asks you to do something, you don't say "I don't want to". You say "I'll try".' She looked surprised and said: 'Oh, I didn't know that.' When I asked again she said: 'I'll try' — and she did try. We had a delightful lesson.

*Keep correction impersonal.* It is not necessary to say: 'You didn't keep your little finger on the bow.' You could say: 'Little finger isn't doing his job. Could you keep a check on him?' Little finger may be in the wrong, but the child is not.

*Realise that you benefit too.* You miss out on a lot if you think it is all giving to the child. If your own development was neglected, you get a second chance to grow with your child. I have always felt that my basic nature was feckless and self-indulgent, but in order to help my children I became organised and conscientious. For the sake of children I have achieved many things that I could never have achieved for myself.

*Be forgiving.* Parents, as well as children, behave badly sometimes. Don't be too demoralised. It happens to us all. It is a gradual process of mutual refinement. Use each practice as an opportunity for you, too, to improve and to gain insight, intuition, imagination and patience.

My answer to the opening question is this: nurturing a child by love is getting him to practise. The parent's job is to find out how to do this. If a child is handled correctly he comes to enjoy the discipline and routine and most of all the achievements that come with regular practice. Remember, we have our thoughts and our hearts fixed on long term goals. Dr Suzuki has the children chant to their parents: ' . . . everything depends on the parent. Father, Mother, please guide us.' Maria Montessori said: 'I have seen the child as he ought to be and found him better than I could ever have supposed.'