

Understanding Effective Practice

Dr. Suzuki understood so much about learning - he was a great observer and looked to natural language acquisition as a model of learning, which he applied to learning music.

He understood two very important things that are crucial for us to remember:

1. Parents are key to learning. **Children learn everything from their parents**, from language to emotional regulation, social skills, self-concept and self-worth.
2. Every child can in the right environment.
 - a. Positive environment
 - b. Consistent work
 - c. Immersion

Carol Dweck found that individuals who believe their talents can be developed through hard work, effective strategies and input from others (growth mindset) tend to achieve more and persevere for longer than those with a more fixed mindset who believe their talents are innate, inborn gifts.

Dweck's work further supports the need for parents to be attuned and focused during practice to offer reality-based, specific and positive feedback and prioritise acknowledging what is working well honestly and genuinely before choosing something to improve. When focusing on the process of practice and encouraging effort rather than the achievement of goals we are facilitating the development of a growth mindset that will serve our children in every area of their lives.

We also need to understand that every one of us operates from a fixed mindset sometimes, and unproductive effort leads to frustration and lack of confidence, which can lead to the fixed mindset belief that we are not good enough.

For this reason, it is important to understand how to make the practice process effective.

Suzuki families these days face challenges that Dr. Suzuki would never have imagined. Parents and children are under a lot of time pressure and parents have far less support from extended families and their communities than when Suzuki developed the philosophy. This adds extra motivation to find ways of practising that work.

We meet resistance during practice because kids are clever and extremely perceptive. They are quick to sense when we are distracted, when we are tired, rushed and grumpy.

Importantly, they see through us when we say "Oh that was amazing!" and 'You are so great' and it doesn't align with how they feel about their playing. Kids know when they are improving and they know when they are stuck.

Our children need us to be honest with them in our feedback and for us to be as fully present as possible with them during practice so they know they and their efforts are truly being seen.

Practice is a skill in and of itself, different to understanding music or the mechanics and techniques of playing an instrument.

A teacher's job is to explain the what and the why of practice by providing information and insight, to model practice skills and a positive environment, and to oversee the long-term development of skills.

A parent's job is to structure the practice and the practice environment to be supportive of the child and the learning process.

Understanding some basic principles of how we learn, what motivates us, and what helps us to focus can inform how we structure the practice. Using games which are informed by the science of learning during practice is key to making the practice more enjoyable and more fruitful.

Models of Learning

Ed Kreitman's Three Cs of Learning

1. Comprehension - understand the task - how to execute it and what the goal is - **Mind**
2. Cooperation - getting the **body** to cooperate with the mind's instructions
3. Constructive repetition - building neural pathways

Comprehension - *Identify a specific goal and understand how to evaluate if it has been achieved. This needs to be established with the teacher in the lesson time - take notes and ask questions!*

Cooperation - *this may or may not happen in the lesson. Regardless, this is the first goal when working towards a goal in practice. Establish cooperation once as a first step.*

For the child, this means being able to pay attention to sensory input from their body and their instrument and to command their own body. The brain is the boss!

Constructive repetition - *Only after establishing you have achieved the goal with intention, repeat with consistency and accuracy to embed the skill, moving toward unconscious competence over time.*

My favourite model of the learning process:

Unconscious Incompetence - Conscious Incompetence - Conscious Competence
Unconscious Competence

How the brain learns

1. The brain is changeable and reflects our life experiences - Plasticity
2. What you do the most is what you do the best - Myelination and Neurogenesis
3. There is no such thing as muscle memory! It is brain memory and muscle development. These are built through repetition.
4. Use it or lose it - Pruning removes underused neural pathways in the brain
5. The brain responds less and less to things that are the same - Habituation
6. Neurons that fire together wire together - skills learned together will be performed together
7. We cannot focus on long strings of information. The brain processes small packets of information better.
8. We can't learn if we don't feel safe, our basic needs aren't met or we are dysregulated. The brain prioritises survival and safety over learning.
9. Execution of motor skills becomes worse in proportion to the number of tasks taken on by the brain
10. Awareness is necessary for conscious learning and precedes habit formation
11. The prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is the home of many executive functioning skills which are necessary for practice, does not fully develop until the mid-20s

Practice Skills (Christine Goodner)

- Time Management - When and for how long will you practice
- Organisational Skills - How will you distribute everything assigned to you over the week?
- Focus - Can you use the time productively and effectively?
- Discipline - Will you show up and do the work?
- Problem-solving skills - Can you put into practice what you have learned and find creative solutions to new problems between lessons?
- Delayed gratification - It may take many practices or weeks to learn something well
- Critical thinking - Can you analyse and work on the technical and musical challenges presented? Can you break them down into smaller parts?
- Perseverance or grit - working through and accepting frustration, dedication to keep going

Categories of Practice Games:

Motivating Practice Structures - Games that make us want to do just a bit more practice

Ex: Practice Egg Hunt, Lucky Dip, Spinning Wheel, Silly Cards, Guess the Fruit

Layered Games: Games that combine skills after several successful repetitions, to integrate skills in the brain

Ex: Baseball, 'I bet you can't', Pearl Necklace Practice

Chunking Games: Games which make it easier to practice less music and fewer skills, with more chance of success

Ex: Question and Answer, Plug it in, Fermata (hold a note longer), Stop Sign, Sticky Notes

Repetition Games: Successful repetitions are necessary to embed skills. Use these for the same skill for several days in a row.

Ex: +7, Monsters, Beads, Lego, any counter

Games for Connection: Can be played over the whole practice

Ex: Dots, Guess the Word, Naughts and Crosses, My turn, your turn, our turn, read a book

Practice Charts and Colouring: Use for repetitions within practice, parts of practice completed and for long-term work

Recognising Effort: Lego, Practice Charts, Races, Counters

Focus and Awareness: Flag Game, Stop Game, Naughty Mummy, 'I bet you can't'

Teaching Games: Games which assess understanding or reteach lessons previously given by the teacher

Ex: What's wrong with my?, Can you spot the difference? Which one sounds like the recording?

'Rules' for practice. How to...

Make Practice Enjoyable, Kind and Functional

- **Connection with your child is the most important ingredient of successful practices.**
- **Your tone of voice and body language are very important.** Use humour and keep it playful.
- **Practice every day, even if only for 5 minutes. Listen to the recording every day.**
- **Keep work, rest and play balanced** - build in movement and breaks
- **Play with the piano accompaniment sometimes**
- **Be okay with stopping when the process doesn't feel finished.** Come back to it tomorrow.
- **Be flexible but focused on the goals**
- **Keep the long term in mind** - what is the ultimate goal, how long do you have to achieve it?
- **Watch carefully for signs of frustration and fatigue and change your approach before they develop fully**
- **Practice every day, even if only for 5 minutes. Listen to the recording every day.**
- **Block out practice and listening times every week.**
- **Use what your child is interested in outside the practice**
- **De-personalise negatives** and use humour whenever you can - 'I see a stinky pinky!' rather than 'You aren't keeping your pinky curled.'
- **Approach practice as a team**
- **Involve your child in decision-making (sometimes) when appropriate and recognise when it is not**
- **Only give honest choices**
- **Teach your child that they are growing and learning and that you are proud of them for taking on something that challenges them so much**

Make Practice Productive

- **Plan your practices and chart your progress**
 - Know the parts of practice your teacher assigns
 - Never skip a part of practice two days in a row

- Plan, using your lesson notes, photos and videos. Identify the weeks goals and specific assignments.
- Write it down and chart your practice.
- Share the plan with your child and represent it in some way
- Develop an 'emergency plan' for busy days or days you aren't around
- **Keep the long term in mind** - what is the ultimate goal, how long do you have to achieve it?
- **Practice starts before you call your child**
 - Prepare the space
 - Collect practice kit
 - Agree on practice rules with your child outside of practice time
 - Give a five-minute warning to allow for a gentle transition to practice
 - **Check in with yourself about what you bring to the practice - are you tired, or irritated? Put it aside if you can or remember during the practice that your child's behaviours are not the source of this emotion**
 - Observe how your child is and consider what is realistically possible in today's practice
- **Play your last 3 pieces every day** to embed them in the brain
- **Use sticky notes to remember specific goals and details** from lessons - put these on the music and leave them there
- **Make a sign and post it** in your practice space with the week's main postural, musical and technical practice points and important long-term reminders
- **Sing!** Get away from the technique of the instrument to focus on the music. If you can't demonstrate on an instrument use your voice.

Make it Effective

- **Don't start at the beginning every time.** Start with boxes, review challenging spots, play one phrase at a time, play the piece out of order, play only the forte phrases, etc.
- **Repeat, repeat, repeat** - spread repetitions over days
- **Choose one goal to master at a time.** Make sure your child knows and understands what the goal is. 3Cs!
- **Start small and integrate back into the big picture when a skill is starting to be embedded**
- **Two steps forward one step back** - review and create ease
- **Use games that are structured to build the skill you need to build** - Focus and awareness, security through repetition, and teaching games.

- **Change your routine and games frequently**
- **Mistakes mean you are doing too much and lead to frustration!** Do less and/or do it slower. Integrate and speed it up only after several correct repetitions.
- **Make sure the child understands the goal.** Teach them the lesson again if necessary.

The Art of Practice - knowing your child, seeing your child, using creativity to reach your child, crafting the environment and the relationship

Suzuki's method is wonderful for learning because it encourages listening, repetition, work on the hardest parts of the pieces in advance, and a supportive and positive environment where the parent can hold onto the art of practice and the skills required until the child is mature and experienced enough to take them on.

Resources for Parents

Christine Goodner - Suzukitriangle.com - Beyond the Music Lesson podcast, Books

Ed Kreitman - Teaching from the Balance Point

Ed Sprunger - Helping Parents Practice - list of games and researched discussions of the difficulties of the practice relationship and how to be more at peace with them

Violinist.com

Dr. Daniel Siegel - Whole Brain Child, No Drama Discipline, Brainstorm

Carol Dweck - Mindset

Joanna Faber and Julie King - How to Talk So Kids Will Listen

Daniel Coyle - The Talent Code

Dr. Stuart Shanker - Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life

<https://www.thepracticeshoppe.com/> - Free printable practice charts, including Suzuki-specific

[Sue Hunt's amazing practice games](#) - includes Lucky Dip cards for bow hold, straight bow and violin posture games

[Molly Gebrian's Youtube Channel](#) - a Violist and Brain Scientist who knows how to practice