

Practicing Tips for Parents of Beginning Orchestra Students

Young children learning an instrument require parental support. As a parent of seven children who has spent a lot of time and money investing in my children's musical education, I would **not** recommend starting a child on an instrument **unless you are willing to support them sufficiently**. To support your child sufficiently, plan on—



Practicing with them daily, 6 days a week.

Be consistent and keep it short. There will be specific instructions for working in a focused manner for 10 minutes. Just like daily reading, if you invest now in establishing a habit of short daily practice, you'll find you won't have to do it for the rest of your child's life. You are preparing a place in your child's mind, heart, and life for lifelong music making and appreciation.

Practice time will vary according to the individual child. My target time for a beginning learner is about 11 minutes of daily practicing. This will gradually move to 20 minutes over their first semester. **Only 10 minutes of that time is spent working together**. The next portion is for them to practice by themselves, adding one minute a week until they can do 10 minutes on their own.

Remember: in with all of life, you don't have to be perfect in this. Do your best, and your best will get better. *You* are learning along with your child.

Having the practice materials ready and setting the timer. If you and your child know that in 11 (or 20) minutes, you will be done *no matter how hard it goes*, you will be able to make it through! BE HONEST, and stop when the timer beeps to say that your time is up. Your child will be able to practice longer in time. For now, be happy to keep things within the time suggested. If your child wants to practice longer, let them, of course! But don't feel like you need to be there with them unless you both want to be there.

It's great to let children work on their own after they have had the support they need for that day. What materials are helpful to practicing? **Their music binder (with lesson plan and sheet music in it), a music stand, a timer, flash cards (if being used in the lessons), a sharpened pencil, and a metronome**. It is also important to have **good lighting** and to have a little **reward for each day**, whether it is a high five, a hug, a drawn smiley face, a sticker, or a treat, etc.

Being patient, positive, praising, and pleasant. When you realize that the success of your child depends on you, you recognize how important it is that you bring your "A



game" to practice time. This might be one of the hardest things you have ever done. (Sometimes is for me.) How do you work with a child who doesn't want to practice or who is really struggling to figure out how to do what their teacher is asking? *That* is the "million dollar question" that you will have to figure out, one minute and one day at a time.

The good news is that if you focus on keeping your own behavior patient, positive, praising and pleasant *no matter how* your child behaves, you will be surprised at how s/he learns how to act during your music time. Over time, s/he will mimic your behavior. Give accurate, specific praise for any good thing the child does as they try. (See the attached page to get some ideas for praising your child.) **All** children are very smart and capable, especially when their best teacher (**YOU**) models the lesson.

Starting with the smallest, simplest task and go slowly. A saying in music is "In order to play fast, practice slowly." I'm reminded of a world-record champion typist who would practice typing at half the speed he wanted to type when racing for the records. When we patiently train our muscles to do something new, it takes correct, slow repetitions to learn what we need. Then we can gradually go faster.

This can be really hard for the child who wants to go FAST from the start. Parents make this easier by giving them only a very, very small task to accomplish so that they can learn how to play it slowly in a relatively short period of time. Then they will be able to speed things up sooner.

Helping them chart their work. It's a proven principle that when you track your progress, you improve faster. When your child completes a task, have HIM or HER check off the box. You already know how to check off a box, but they need to develop that habit. It can be really annoying to do something so simple, but when a child looks back on their week to see all of those checkmarks, they have a real sense of satisfaction. When they look back and see only a few, it helps them to recognize why they aren't playing the piece the way they should.



There is no magic to learning music. It is simply learning to practice that is the key to any successful musician. Our goal usually isn't for children to grow up to be professional musicians. Our goal is to learn to play sufficiently that we can enjoy making music together! We hope that they will learn to play the music in their heart.

If you know you cannot or do not want to support your child in these ways, I suggest you wait to start your child on an instrument until they are older. If you are simply nervous about your abilities, take courage! **When there's a will, there's a way!**