

Motivating Children to Practice

By Jennifer Thomas

I recently asked a group of parents what was the one thing they needed help with regarding their children's music lessons, as well as something that the teacher could be working on as well. The answer: **Motivating children to practice.**

I've had this discussion with my own students' parents many times. Some parents really push their kids, and some have little to no involvement at all. What are they doing wrong? What are they doing right? These are things they ask me.

I personally do not think that there is one right answer because every person is unique. For example, I was a very self-motivated child and never had to be told to practice. I just did it, and excelled at it. However, I know that some of my students don't progress with this type of method in the home and practicing does not happen.

It can be true of the reverse as well though. Some children may need to be reminded or pushed to practice, and therefore they excel with that type of motivation. Whereas other children, when pushed too hard, back away or rebel.

Here are some things that I have found to help me with my students, as well as advice that I would offer to parents.

What can the parent do to help the child?

Know your child and what type of motivation will work for them. If the child is very self motivated, that is great! But it doesn't mean that they don't want your involvement. Be proactive to step in the room while they are practicing and compliment them, or give other types of positive reinforcement. On the other hand, if your child does need reminders, be consistent with them. Help them to know that it's important every week, not just the weeks that you remember to step in and say something. I have one student who earns allowance money when she practices, but the method only works when her parents are consistent in motivating her. I've seen weeks go by when she didn't practice because her parents were not being involved enough.

Help the child see the value in music. I know it is hard for an 8 year old to imagine what his or her life will be like when they are 25 years old, but I can't count how many times I've heard adults say to me "I quit taking piano when I was young and it was such a mistake. I wish I could go back and take lessons again." Parents can help children know the value that musical talent brings to society. Take them to a symphony concert, or to a musical that would inspire them. Help them to be aware of future opportunities where they could be of help with their talent. I'm not saying that you should tell your child that they need to work hard so that they can be a concert pianist. I'm merely saying that there are so many valuable experiences to be had in music, including service opportunities within the community.

Set up a reward system. Now, again, with what I said earlier about different personality types, this may only be necessary for those students who need a little extra motivation. I used to do a point system in my studio where the students could earn points every week for things like showing up on time, keeping their fingernails trimmed, practicing, etc. At the end of the month,

depending on how many points they earned they could choose a prize out of the prize box. More points afforded them more valuable prizes than lower points. Another example – right now I have a student who has an agreement with her parents that they will pay for her piano lessons only if she practices. If she fails to practice, then she has to pay for her lesson that week out of her allowance money. This might seem a bit on the negative side of motivation, but again, for some students this is what works for them (and I know personally that this is the *only* method that her parents have tried that has actually worked).

What can the Teacher to do help the student?

Be their biggest cheerleader. I am a big fan of positive reinforcement with children and teenagers. With everything they have to deal with these days, they really need a cheerleader. Teachers really need to take off their critical hats quite often and look for any positive thing that the student is doing right and praise them for it. I think we as teachers sometimes listen to our students play and hear every tiny mistake and we work them until the song is eventually perfect. But there are some students that will never play that song perfect as hard as you work them, but they are playing it *the best that they possibly can*. As a teacher, you need to recognize this and praise them. Positive comments and reinforcement only encourage students to keep working hard and practicing.

Competition. Now this might not work for all students, but I do know that some students can be very competitive. Every time it is getting near recital time at my studio, you can feel this pressure in the air and the students are either working really hard on their recital songs, or so far beyond trying that they want to give up entirely. For those ready to give up (or for those only giving a mediocre attempt at their songs), I will sometimes casually mention that “So and so has been working really hard on her song for the recital, and wow I think she is about the same age as you.” I try to plant this little seed in their head as nonchalant as possible, but I always see them back the next week with a song that has been practiced to death. Kids can be competitive, and they like to win. If they know that their peers are trying hard, then gosh darnitt they will try hard too. Along with planting “seeds of competition” in their head, you could also hold a real competition with your students. I’ve had practicing competitions where the student who practiced the most hours for a certain period of time would get a prize. We hold a prize ceremony and master class and present the prize. It’s amazing how much harder the students work when there is a prize at stake, as well as competition with their peers.

Expect their best, not your best. This kind of goes along with some of the things I mentioned in #1, but more specifically, knowing when to “have a chat” with your students about practicing. I will be the first to admit that I love to have a fun atmosphere with teaching. I want my students to have fun and enjoy the music that they are learning and love coming to lessons each week. But with that sort of atmosphere sometimes comes a sense of “I don’t have to work hard” from certain students. Of course this is not true, and when I see a need to bring it up, I will “have the chat” with students. This chat usually involves me letting them know how much I do expect from them, how impressed I am when they do practice, and what a difference it makes. In a nutshell, I let them know that they are capable of much more than they are giving me and I want to see that from them. I don’t expect them to give me perfection, but I do expect them to give me their best.

Jennifer is a composer, recording artist, and piano teacher from Seattle, Washington. She has been teaching the piano for 15 years, and currently maintains a small studio of 15 piano students and 2 violin students, where she encourages creativity, and fun. In addition to teaching, she records and composes her own music, and she performs publicly. Last year she toured the northwest including shows in Seattle at Benaroya Hall, Salt Lake City, Idaho Falls featuring guest artists Emmy award winning composer/pianist Jace Vek, and pianist Michele McLaughlin. Jennifer started playing the piano and violin at age 5, and went on to study Piano Pedagogy at Brigham Young University (Idaho). She has performed as a soloist with the Murray Symphony Orchestra on the MacDowell 2nd Piano Concerto, and won the silver prize in her university's concerto competition for Prokofiev's 3rd Piano Concerto. She has worked with the Seattle Symphony, participated with the Seattle Composer's Salon at Benaroya Hall and was a featured soloist at the Roosevelt Hotel. Jennifer performed with the Salt Lake Temple Square Concert Series for 3 years and has also performed on the violin with various symphonies including the Oregon Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra. Jennifer and her husband, Will have one toddler, Preston, and one baby on the way due in August of 2010. She enjoys motherhood and learning to juggle her music career along with it. She enjoys writing, chocolate, cooking, fashion, logging, and a variety of outdoor sports.