

Getting the Most out of Piano Lessons

Piano lessons involve a big investment of both time and money. Most parents will spend about \$900 per year per child for music lessons, not including the cost of materials and registration fees for exams and festivals. The good news is the investment is well worthwhile. Children who learn music not only acquire an artistic skill which will bring them personal fulfillment and enjoyment throughout their lives, but also improve their ability to self-regulate, manage time, and set goals. Playing piano stimulates neural activity by coordinating activity across many different cortical areas simultaneously. It also improves motor dexterity, which can lead to improved ability to master fine motor skills in other domains. I have created the following list of suggestions to inform parents about what they can do to ensure that their child benefits the most from each and every piano lesson.

1. Have a piano in your home.

Surprisingly, many parents ask me if they will need to have a piano in their home for their child to take piano lessons. The answer is yes, even if you only intend to try it out for a while to see if your child likes it. If you are not ready to commit to buying your own piano, rent an electric piano from Long and McQuade for \$40 per month. Taking lessons without a piano in the home for practicing is a waste of time and money.

2. Bring all music books and notebooks to every lesson.

This is perhaps the most common issue that can erode the quality of lessons over time. Forgetting a book once is not a big deal, but if the student is frequently arriving without their music books and their homework notebook it is difficult for the teacher to establish a routine with the child. Arriving unprepared also unintentionally sends the child the message that music lessons are not a priority and do not need to be

taken seriously.

3. Buy the recommended music books as soon as possible.

I will recommend new music books as the student progresses. I will usually give parents plenty of notice about when the books will be needed. If students don't get the new materials in a timely manner their progress will be interrupted. Ensuring the students' new music books are purchased promptly ensures they will continue to progress without stagnating, minimizing the risk of losing motivation and interest.

4. Listen to the recommended recordings.

I believe very strongly in the value of introducing students to the piano by teaching them to play by ear. This means the student must recognize the melodies they are learning. Hearing me sing and play them during the lesson will not be enough, and the parent should make sure the student is listening to the recommended recordings many times per week. If the student is listening to the recordings it is likely they will pass through the introductory ear training material quickly and easily. If not, they will struggle with the material for many months and I will eventually give up and move them to a sight-reading method book. Simply listening to the CD in your car before the child goes to bed can mean the difference between success and failure for many young students in their first few months.

5. Set up and maintain a regular practice routine.

Enforcing a regular practice routine is imperative. No student will progress without daily practice. Please consult the *Tips for Setting up a Practice Routine* page for suggestions as to how this can be accomplished effectively.

6. Maintain a good practice atmosphere at home.

Try to limit distractions for the child during their home practice sessions. This means no TV in the background, and no iPads or smart devices near the piano, unless they are being used for a metronome or theory game. I would also avoid storing toys on or around the piano, since it sends the message that piano practice is not to be taken seriously. This is especially

true if the lesson is taking place in the student's own home.

7. Discuss behaviour expectations for the lessons with your child.

Lessons are very short. Many minutes can be wasted if the child is poorly behaved and the teacher must constantly interrupt the flow of the lesson to address disruptive behaviour, such as playing while the teacher is talking, getting up off of the piano bench, or not listening to the teacher's requests. Don't assume the student will already know how to behave in this new situation. I have seen quite a collection of bizarre behaviour over the years from even the pleasantest of children, including yelling, taking clothes off, hiding, wiping their nose on my clothes, spitting, etc. If behaviour is an issue for a student I will request that the parent sits in on the lessons until such time as the issues have been resolved.

8. Consider attending the last 10 minutes of each lesson.

Attending the last 10 minutes of the lesson allows the parent to see what the child has learned and what they must practice for homework.

9. Read the homework in their notebook with your child after each lesson.

This will help you supervise their practice sessions to make sure they complete the necessary homework.

10. Sign the student's practice logbook.

Most students will have a practice logbook that parents must sign. Signing each time the student practices helps show them it is important to you that they practice. This system may also be familiar to them from school reading or homework programs.

11. Ask the student to play for you.

Asking your child to play for you helps motivate them to practice. It also increases their performing confidence.