

Setting up a Practice Routine

We all know that improving at anything takes dedication and practice. This is especially true of playing a musical instrument, which places the highest demands on our motor control system of any human activity. Playing piano requires the coordination of complex finger movement sequences using both hands at the same time. Often these sequences are very different in each hand. When you consider that most of us have to concentrate quite hard before we can rub our tummies and pat our heads simultaneously you can start to appreciate the monumental task the brain is presented with when we play the piano. Add in the fact that you also have to precisely time these movements, that you continually direct your vision between the music and either of your hands, and that you must also learn to control how loudly and softly you play with moment to moment precision, I would say it is a miracle anyone can play Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, let alone memorize entire concertos. Considering the complexity of the task helps us understand why it takes most expert pianists a minimum of ten years of consistent, daily practice before they become proficient enough to play the masterworks.

Daily practicing might seem like a big commitment. Most parents want their children to have fun learning music and might worry that enforcing a practice routine will place too much pressure on the child and take all the enjoyment and magic out of making music. The truth is, **it is fun to be good**. Think about it...if you took up golf as a hobby but showed up every week at your golf lesson without being able to hit the ball, would you be having very much fun at your lesson? You'd likely get frustrated with each passing week, hopelessly swinging the club only to look down and see that little white ball down on the tee, mocking you.

Now imagine one week you went to the driving range by yourself and practiced for an hour, experimenting with your swing, adjusting your movement a little bit here and there, then suddenly...voila!! You hit the ball and it goes down the range! You'd probably feel pretty good, right? You'd probably be excited to show your instructor what you learned at the next lesson, too!

The same thing goes for a child in piano lessons. Children who don't practice tend not to progress and often feel frustrated or even fearful of attending lessons. They might erroneously think they are not talented enough

and might have low self-confidence about their ability to play the piano. These same kids often feel thrilled when they learn a piece and can proudly show-off what they can do. It is a complete myth that some kids are simply untalented and cannot learn to play music. Although not every child will or should develop into a piano prodigy, I believe that every child is capable of learning to play at their own rate if they practice. Every time a child practices they open themselves up to the possibility of gaining a skill or insight that will give them a feeling of pride and accomplishment, motivating them to continue! Piano lessons only occur once a week, so most of a student's learning will occur through self-exploration during their home practice, away from the teacher.

The formula is clear: Piano lessons *without* practice equate to a waste of money and the potential for frustration or low self-confidence about music-making to develop for the child. Piano lessons *with* practice equate to the potential for intellectual, emotional, and physical development. To help your child get the most out of their piano lessons, consider the following tips for setting up a successful practice routine right from the start:

Tips for Successful Practice

1. Get your piano *before* lessons commence.
2. Have “piano playtimes” when you play informally and freely with your child at the piano. You can even start these a month or so before enrolling them in lessons. This will give you a good idea about whether or not they find the instrument interesting and can lay the basis for a future reoccurring practice routine.
3. Start with only 10 minutes per day.
4. Establish a recurring time for practice each day that can be maintained, week-to-week. Plan for *at least* 70 minutes of time over the course of every week that can be exclusively devoted to piano practice.
5. Enforce the practice routine consistently from the first week of lessons. Waiting even one or two weeks may cause the student to develop incorrect expectations about the length and frequency of piano practice

that are hard to overcome later on.

6. Use a kitchen timer or smartphone app to time the length of practice sessions. Practicing is easier when the end of the session is clearly defined.
7. Practice with your child. This will likely be necessary for the first one to two years of lessons, depending on the student.
8. Ask them to show you what they learned or to teach you how to play something they learned at their lessons.
9. Use positive language and enthusiastic voice cues related to the piano and to practicing. Show them you are excited to hear them play.
10. Encourage them to play for their friends and family.
11. Make practice time non-negotiable. Avoid letting them use temper tantrums to completely skip a practice session. This behavior is learned very quickly and is extremely difficult to unlearn. If the student is having a difficult practice day, try one of the following options instead of letting them skip it:
 - Give them a “this or that” choice by saying they could either do all 10 minutes of practice now, or do 5 minutes now and save the other 5 minutes for later.
 - Try starting with a fun, music-related activity, such as writing their own song, or playing a music game they learned in class.
 - Ask them to start by teaching you something they know how to do.
12. Let your child observe you enjoying music, whether it is listening to it in the car or singing songs together. Perhaps you could dust off your old guitar or ukulele and relearn some songs from your youth?
13. Show your child videos of other children their age playing the piano on YouTube. Seeing other kids playing music will help them imagine

themselves doing it too. Videos of older students and adults are also useful for motivation and inspiration.

14. Celebrate and praise your child when they voluntarily practice or when they play on their own for fun. Let them know you enjoy hearing them play.
15. Avoid reward systems, unless this approach seems to work with your child for other areas of their life. Reward systems are typically associated with activities we do not want to do, such as doing chores. It is best if the child does not think of playing the piano as a chore.
16. Communicate with the teacher! Keep the lines of communication with the teacher open regarding your child's practice habits and challenges. Maintaining a dialogue allows the teacher to offer suggestions and to help guide the student toward more effective practice strategies