

Learning to Play: Tips for Parents of Young Musicians

by Ardene Shafer and Christine Stinson

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Whether you play an instrument yourself or can't even whistle, these tips will help you guide your child into the wonderful world of music-making.

Learning a musical instrument is a family affair! Your child needs your guidance and encouragement. Read on for age-specific tips on how to create a lasting relationship between your child and his instrument of choice.

Practice Tips for Elementary-School Kids

- Help your child set up a special place at home to play the instrument.
- Establish a time each day to play. Some children are at their best in the morning, before school. Some parents set a time after the evening bath when the child is relaxed, but not tired.
- Consider using the phrase "playing time" rather than "practice time."
- If possible, be a positive part of your child's playing time. Sit with your child while he plays and ask, "Show me what you're learning." Or, consider learning to play the instrument with your child.
- Praise your child for each step forward.
- Never make negative remarks about how your child's playing sounds. It takes time and effort to produce musical sounds.
- Encourage other family members to applaud the child's efforts. Positive attention is a great motivator.
- Remember that there are always peaks and valleys in the learning process. You and your child should expect times of discouragement, accept them, and focus on the positive fact that she's learning to make music. Remind her that everything worth doing takes time and effort.
- Provide positive role models. Bring your child to hear amateur or professional musicians perform. Take your child to movies that show musicians in a positive light, such as "Music of the Heart."

Practice Tips for Middle- and High-School Kids

- Help your child set up a regular time every day to practice.
- Help him establish a routine. This may require some consultation with the teacher. A typical middle schoolers' half-hour practice routine might include:

Warm-up -- 1-3 minutes

Play a fun, familiar piece -- 3-5 minutes

Work on a new or difficult piece -- 10-15 minutes

Work on technical requirements, such as scales or other technique builders -- 5 minutes

Play something fun to conclude the session

High school students may have more technical problems to work on, but they also have the ability to practice longer in a more concentrated way.

- Help your child understand that playing only familiar songs will not help her improve.
- Explain to your child that learning happens in stages. Sometimes a student will work on something for a long time with no apparent improvement, and then discover a sudden leap in ability. Other times, learning happens very quickly. The important thing to stress is that consistent practice will yield results.
- Help your young musician set practice goals. Keeping a journal, not just a practice chart, helps track the peaks and valleys of learning a new piece or improving fundamental skills.
- As a parent, don't make judgments about the musical quality of your child's practicing. Learning an instrument requires lots of squeaks, scratches, and wrong notes