

Practicing Tips

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Practicing – The Art of Repetition

Why do we practice?

To learn to play our instrument. Learning to play an instrument has many benefits which I am not going to outline here. Suffice to say that practicing helps to work towards those outcomes.

How does practice change with age?

At first with young children, they learn best through play so a lot of our practice is game based. As they get older they gradually obtain an understanding of repetition and how that makes things easier, but primarily it is still using games and stickers/rewards as encouragement. What follows is an ownership of practice by the student. Don't expect that this is the end. Students need to be encouraged even as young adults and seem to like parent involvement (however limited) even when they are older. The balance is very hard to gauge when they are over 10 but well worth the effort.

Is there a magic formula?

Some say having fun is the key, but I don't believe that there is one formula which works for everyone. Every family dynamics and situation is different. You need to find what works for you and your family. There are many hints and ideas in this book which are great fun to try.

Definitions

What is Practice? Practice is the repetition of an activity in order to gain skill: eg piano practice, tennis practice, football practice, guitar practice.

What is repetition? Repetition is the act of experiencing something again; an act to occur more than once.

KEY TO EASY PRACTISES:

2 rules:

1. Make your practices a set number of tasks and DO NOT GO OVER under any circumstance (even if the student is doing really really well).
2. Do something everyday even if it is just a little.

How do these rules help you ask?

- If your student knows that there is a beginning, middle and end to a practice (specially an end) they are more likely to return to do a practice without too much hassle.
- The repetition everyday helps with muscle memory retention
- Repetition also makes it easy for brain memory retention.
- It teaches self motivation and discipline
- Shows the student that doing something everyday means you can achieve amazing things
- It is much easier to learn in incremental steps,
- This builds confidence which means that children are more inclined to take risks.

All of these attributes help with practices and also flow into other aspects of their lives.

Key to coming back to practices day after day:

Make your practices a **set number of tasks** and DO NOT GO OVER under any circumstance (even if the student is doing really really well).

This idea is paramount to the student wanting to come back to practicing each day. The way this works is that the children know that there is going to be an end to the practice. It sounds very simple but it works a treat. The children's mind work in very short term concepts and we need to support them when we work with them.

Even the smallest children understand routine and gets really excited when they for instance, have a bath if they know that a story is coming after and this is their favourite time of the day. They anticipate activities, whether that be the end of something or a certain activity during the day.

To make this work you need to ensure that YOU NEVER DO "ONE MORE SONG" or just "one more time". Sometimes the tendency is to do just "one more" when they are going really well, however this will undermine the beginning, middle and end process. The children won't know when practice will finish next time, so therefore they are not willing to come back and practice the next day, in case the practice never stops. It is very simple.

Routines

What to consider?

- Physical development,
- Emotional development,
- Intellectual development
- What is happening in your students life; and
- the study level of the student.

Considering this list seems ominous and really hard, you know your student better than anyone else and can gauge when the time is best and for how long.

I always suggest that mornings are best for practice as it gets it out of the way and you don't have to nag or think about it again. However, some people are not morning people and need to practice at another time. It should be in a routine even if it is say after cubs on Monday, and tennis on Tuesday, dinner on Wednesday and lunch on Saturday. As long as this is what happens every week and the student is comfortable with this it is OK.

Parents from my children's school always say how much music must dominate our lives given how accomplished the children are. However I find that my kids are thinking about it less than others who do their practice after school and then try to put it off for hours, until someone in the house insists that they do their practice. This is unnecessary when you can achieve lots in the morning and then have time to play in the afternoon or do other things like homework / trampolining / dolls / or pretending to be spiderman, all very important tasks to complete before bed.

How long should my child practice for?

Each child is different with different needs, however here is a guideline which I normally give my parents.

Beginner should endeavour to practice 5 minutes daily which will increase to 20 minutes by the end of book 1.

Everyone can fit in 5 minutes every day. Focus on the short time. If the children are struggling give them some goals to work towards. Remember that children work in very short time frames.

Book 2+ level children should be on a task limit – not a time limit.

I find task limits work much better when children are trying to develop good practicing routines. (It helps to stop the procrastinating)

Revision is key to quicker practices. My children do most of their revision of previous books on the weekend in a separate practice with their Dad. It is great because he sees the advancement and enjoys the time with them when it is not the stress or frustration of a new piece or technique. Everyone wins then.

Games

Children learn and retain more information when they laugh.

These games can be used for repetition of sections (either learning off by heart or perfecting a section) and revision of old pieces.

You will need to change the games on a regular basis. I work on the premise “What works today, may not work tomorrow”

Under 5

Games for this age are important as it gives the children a break from the repetitions but still keeping their concentration on the task. Their muscles get a small break while they put the monkey on or race that car, but they are ready to do another repetition and their concentration doesn't waiver.

Doing Games:

- Barrel of Monkeys
- Car races
- Frog in a pond
- Mystery pictures
- puzzles

5 years – 9 years

Still like the doing games

- Barrel of Monkeys
- Car races
- Frog in a pond
- Mystery pictures
- puzzles

ALSO:

- Concerts for neighbours, relatives, grand parents etc
- Charts for practices completed, revision or tasks in a practice
- Rewards and bribery are great at this age (see motivation section)
- Celebrating the children's achievements with parties, dinner, or going somewhere special is really important.
- Start to become involved in orchestra or ensemble groups

10 years and beyond

Here are some ideas for those students coming into the teenage years. Some of the students will be advanced students who have a wealth of knowledge about practicing and how to get out of it. Good Luck

- Contracts developed between the child and teacher and parent.
- Motivation at this age can be from external sources, such as orchestras, ensembles, at school or after school.
- Charts for practices completed, revision or tasks in a practice with the eye to a reward.
- Rewards and bribery are great – use their currency, more credit on their phone, a trip into town, a new DS game, etc
- Go to conferences and music camps where children get to be with others their own age. This helps with motivation as they want to be with their music peers.

Ensure that you include the student in the negotiation of practice times, length etc

TIP: use the teacher as much as possible during this age group.

Rules

All of these games can be used for repetition of sections or for playing revision pieces. Sometimes you need an incentive for playing those old pieces. In my studio I always try to get the children to think of a “practice point” to make their playing better when playing revision pieces, but this sometimes is not enough and we need the games below.

The Rules here are just a guide. You can make up any games which you might like. Please feel free to change them and make up new ones. I would love people to e-mail me with new games to share
amandajust@adam.com.au.

REMEMBER: Small steps make big progress

Barrel of Monkeys –

Rules: A number of ways to play this game. If you have a section of a piece or skill you want to polish, see how many monkeys can hang off your stand or violin. You get one monkey for a perfect execution of that skill.

Older students: Place 5 monkeys hanging and then take one off if they get it right. The trick to this game is that if they get it wrong you add a monkey. You can also take two monkeys off if they do an exceptional execution (which helps them to try for that perfection).

Please be aware that the student needs to succeed, so don't make it too hard for them. If they are struggling, make the task a little easier and reward for the smallest

part which was correct (eg. Your bow was in the perfect place, I think we will take a monkey off)

KEY: to make this a fun rewarding experience with a sense of achievement

Mystery pictures

Rules: When the child plays the section correctly, you drawing a section of the picture.

The adult needs to have a good idea what they are going to draw and make it a little difficult for the children (eg don't draw the wings of a butterfly first, draw the circles or patterns which will be on the wings or the antanee and do the wings last). The sense of anticipation motivates the children to play the section more. If they guess the picture, they still need to continue till it is finished.

Variations: the children could draw the picture for you a piece at a time and you need to guess.

Car races

Rules: Set up two or more cars which can be moved by pushing a button or winding back. When the student correctly plays their section they get to push the button and the car shoots forward. When they have done another section correctly they get to shoot another car and see which car wins in the end. This is great for girls or boys.

HINT: You can get these cars from Kmart or Big W for \$4 for two, or you can also use wind up cars or pull back cars. Some of my parents have used this opportunity to purchase a car racing set (needless to say this is the dads).

Frog in a pond

Rules: Each correct playing gets a chance to bounce the frog into the pond. To see how many frogs end up in their pond.

Puzzles

Rules: Each correct playing means that they get to put another piece in the jigsaw puzzle.

Noughts and Crosses

Rules: Each correct playing means that you can put another cross down. I also play it with the parent or teacher having to play the section to put their piece down. This re-inforces the correct playing of the section or piece.

Variation 1: Sometimes I use the rule where if you don't get it right you miss putting a piece down and then the other person gets their go. It changes the game substantially and makes it play very differently.

Variation 2: You can also use this rule with Trouble, snakes and ladders and Chinese crosses. This would go for the whole practice. Everytime they played a revision piece, played a repetition section or scales etc, they get to move a piece

Dice

Rules:

- roll the dice to find out how many times you do a task
- Roll the dice to find out which piece you play in the book. (you might need two dice or maybe a 20 sided dice obtained from toy shops or gaming shops)
- Make up your own dice with the names of revision pieces on it
- Make up your own dice with how to play pieces (eg, allegro- fast, legarto,-slow, piano – soft, forte – loud, lying down, sitting down, upside down bow etc) ask your teacher for some other ideas.
- HINT: BIG dice are better.

If you are clever with the sewing machine you can make really good material dice with clear pockets on the outside to slip in any sort of cards. This way you have the power to change the sides of the dice easily and they can grow with your student.

Make a chain out of paper

Rule: Every time a piece is played for revision, you can add to the chain. The chain is made from strips of paper stapled or taped together and linked with existing circles. One circle fits inside another, but please ensure that you fit the strip of paper through the existing chain and then tape the ends together. You can put this in their bedroom or loop it around the music area. The children love to see it grow. It helps them to visually see their progress.

MOTIVATION:

What is Motivation? Motivation is the reason or reasons one has to act in a particular way.

What we endeavour to achieve is that the children will be self motivated for practice. This comes at about the age of 45. No really. We all need reasons to do things and sometimes those reasons are long term and sometimes short term. Children only act with short term reasons, so we need to help with their reasons (even if it seems to be bribery and corruption) because they cannot see the long term reasons.

Charts

Sometimes charts are a great way of getting the children to see their progress. I always have a motivation at the end of the chart and also strategically placed incentives along the way. That way you are helping with the short term goals and also getting them to see the long term goals.

I use the following charts for students:

- Amount of practices during the week
- revision songs played
- what to do each practice
- amount of times you repeat a skill

The revision chart shows the children that the more you play a song the better it gets. Then you have to practice the songs which are not as often played to make up the spaces on the chart. When the chart is filled you can get a prize.

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I don't suggest that you use too many charts. Some children love them and some it doesn't work for at all. Sometimes it is good to do different things.

Some eggs of charts:

Revision Chart

Twinkle var 1	✓	✓	✓						
Twinkle var 2	✓	✓							
Twinkle var 3	✓								

Weekly Practise Chart

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Revision	✓	✓	✓				
New piece	✓	✓	✓				
Practice skills	✓						
Tonalization	✓		✓				
scales			✓				

Practise Chart - Ongoing

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Number of Practises
✓	✓	✓	✓		4
✓					1
	✓		✓		2
					Total = 7

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Concerts

Every teacher and parent has a different idea about concerts. You need to choose the right time for your student to start playing in front of people. Concerts can be very daunting for students, however it helps with good practicing as you are working toward a goal. A good start is by giving concerts to relatives, next door neighbours etc. Don't push too hard in the beginning. Some children love to give concerts, and some find it very stressful.

Keys to success in a concert: Always play a piece which you have been playing for a long time and know really well. Don't play your latest piece. You need to have room in your performance for nerves which will decrease the performance.

Goals and Rewards

Goals and rewards for practicing can be very varied for all students. They can be immediate or long term, expensive or just a cuddle. Remember a reward is not necessarily a physical item you give.

We all use goals in our lives eg. We try to lose weight to get into a dress, or bring our lunch to work instead of buying it so that we can afford that new TV. By using this technique during our practice sessions we are helping the children to realize is that it is important that you are reward for good jobs, and that persistence helps us to achieve.

What is the best rewards you ask? It depends on the student, some students like to go on outings, some like a

certain food reward, some like a present. Whatever has currency in your students life at the moment.

In my family I give cuddle and yippee rewards very generously, but use a long term goal and reward system. I have used rewards such as zoo trips, going out for dinner, going to the beach for a swim, and when they were a little older we resorted to getting that new game for the Nintendo DS Lite, going to a music conference and even getting a new instrument. This way the children are learning to work for a really good reason.

Also remember that it is always good just to do practice because it makes you feel good. This is a good lesson in itself. Good Luck with your music journey. It holds lots of fun in store for everyone.

What do I do when my child is sick?

It is important that you determine how sick a child is. Obviously you don't want to have children with high temperatures and vomiting trying to play their instrument. However here are some things you can do so that you don't ruin all that good work you have done with practice routines. Make it a real game for them. A little laughing is good for recovery.

- Practice using your CD. Play each piece you would normally play with your instrument on your CD. It is great for revision. I also try and get them to watch the music as it is playing on the CD if they are up to it.
- Get Mum or Dad to play the instrument instead and the student to tell you what you are doing wrong.

Remember that it is OK to miss practices from illness. If the illness is prolonged however, try and find inventive ways of getting them to listen to their CD or even playing a little. Revision is better than new techniques.

Chronically ill children? Can they learn an instrument?

Of course chronically ill children can play an instrument. Sometimes it is really important that they have something other than medical and school issues to talk about. The small steps of the Suzuki Methodology suits this situation. It doesn't matter how long it takes to learn, as long as you are enjoying it and practicing regularly. I find that these children like to have the control of one aspect of their life when all else is changing. They can always fit in a 5 minute practice.

My child (who is chronically ill), has benefited from playing the guitar and I would not like to take this achievement and building of her self esteem away from her, just because sometimes she can't practice. It has been a really positive experience for us as a family and gives her control of part of her life. I hope that more children who have chronic conditions get to appreciate making music, the closeness which comes with practicing together every day and the love that comes with it. What a great achievement to play a new piece when all else is really difficult in their lives.

Practicing Tips

A note from the author:

Dear Readers,

I would like to thank all the parents and teachers who have given their ideas to getting this booklet together. It is an ongoing process to determine which games work best with which students. So, if you have any other ideas which work really well, please let me know. As each child is different I am always looking for new ideas to pass onto parents. I can be contacted on

amandajust@adam.com.au

Thanks for sharing
Amanda