

the young musician's
guide to practice



PRACTICE GUIDE

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1. Have a set time of the day to practice

NOT SCHEDULED = NOT A PRIORITY

Too often we fall into the trap of practicing “when we get to it”. However, “when we get to it” often turns into “the last possible moment right before the piano lesson” or even worse, not getting around to practicing at all. Very little productive practice can be done in the frantic moments before a family walks out the door to a lesson. And it goes without saying that productive practice can’t happen without the practicing itself. We make time for things that are a priority, and we don’t make time for the things that aren’t. If practicing is a weekly priority it must find its way onto the weekly schedule.

THE “PRACTICE SHOCK” CRISIS

A scheduled practice time gets you and your child on the same page about when it is time to stop day-to-day life and practice. Without this being scheduled, kids have no chance to see practice time coming and this often results in whining or tantrums - what I like to call the Practice Shock Crisis. Just like they know that each morning they wake up and go to school, or each evening they eat dinner, they also know that ___:___ in the morning / afternoon is practice time. Parents are much less likely to have conflict about practice when it is scheduled, avoiding practice shock crisis.



2. Have a goal for each practice session

It can be difficult to be motivated to practice when you're not sure exactly what to do when you sit down at your instrument. The most common practice routine I have seen is for a student to sit down at the piano (pick up a violin, saxophone, vocal sheet music, etc.) and sing or play through the song from beginning to end over and over. After you play through the song a few times there is very little else to do and the student gets bored very quickly. The reason for this approach to practice is that students don't have a clear idea of what needs to be accomplished during each practice session. How do we solve this?

Practice sessions should be structured. The general breakdown for a 45 minute practice period is as follows:

10 MINUTES - WARM UPS AND TECHNIQUE WORK

5 MINUTES - SIGHT READING

10 MINUTES - REPERTOIRE #1

10 MINUTES - REPERTOIRE #2

10 MINUTES - REPERTOIRE #3

This breakdown of time can be altered, but every practice session should include those three crucial components: warm ups, sight reading, and repertoire. (Notice here that the repertoire work comes last, which is so often the opposite approach that students take). Each section of the practice session should have a specific goal. For instance, a warm up and technique goal for clarinet could be to cover the key holes completely through the warm up sequence. A sight reading goal for vocalists could be to sing through an exercise with all the correct rhythms. Repertoire goals might include playing dynamically, with correct articulation, or correct intonation. Pick one musical "focus area" for each practice category and make it a daily goal, or a weekly goal.



3. The practice environment

Have you ever told your child to practice only to find that they keep getting up to watch tv with siblings, get a drink of water, or find a pencil? In the same way that there is a set time to practice each day, there should be a set practice space. This should be a place that is as clear from distractions as possible, where the instrument, music books, and practice materials live. This sets the student up for success by having everything necessary for practice right there without being tempted to get up too often.

WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A PRACTICE SPACE?

- MUSIC STAND
- ALL METHOD BOOKS
- ALL REPERTOIRE BOOKS
- METRONOME
- PENCIL
- PRACTICE NOTEBOOK
- RECORDING DEVICE



4. Slow practice

Without a doubt this is the hardest thing to convince my students to do, but it is

SO NECESSARY!

Practice makes permanent. This means that when you practice with poor technique or practice a rhythm incorrectly, you are engraving that motion into your muscles. A typical instrumentalist may practice one difficult measure over and over nine times and finally get it right on the tenth. . . and then move on to something else! When this happens, you have told your muscles nine incorrect ways to play the measure and only played the correct way only once. The next time you play through the piece do you think your muscles will remember the correct way or the incorrect way to play the bar? Without purposeful muscle memory work through slow practice, we can never hope for our muscles to remember the correct way to play.

Slow practice means that we are guiding our muscles to remember good intonation, articulation, rhythm, or phrasing every single time. It seems very tedious at first but when it comes time to play the piece in front of an audience, you will be so glad that these motions are second nature to your muscles in the midst of performance anxiety!!

Practicing slowly is easier said than done. It can be very difficult to set a slow tempo and then stay with it through the remainder of your practice time. This is why a metronome is so important. It keeps you accountable to a steady beat during your practice session.

Once you have practiced a trouble spot in your music slowly and your muscles are comfortable with the motions, you can start bumping up the tempo gradually. continue this process until you are playing up to performance tempo.

Sometimes it can be hard to decide exactly how slow to start out and how fast to end. If you're not sure what tempo your metronome should be at, ask your private lesson teacher. He or she can give you a wise starting tempo for slow practice and a target tempo for a performance.



5. Evaluate the quality of your child's at home practice

Does he know what to work on? Does he have a space to work on it?

Does he have a plan for how to be successful every single time he practices?

6. Choose one or two practice tips to implement in the coming weeks

What are the changes you can make that will be the most beneficial for your child? If your at home practice looks nothing like what's described above, don't try to change your approach all at once. You are better off choosing one or two changes at a time. Anything more can be overwhelming.

7. Talk to your private lesson teacher

Let your teacher know what your at home practice struggles are and how you are going to use your chosen practice tips to make that time more valuable. Ask for feedback over the course of the next few weeks to discuss improvement and the next steps for your child's musical progress.



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