

How to Help Your Kid Practice

A Quick Guide



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Classic Studios

Music Lessons to Create Memories

— That Last a Lifetime —

How to Help Your Kid Practice

Is it a struggle to get your kid to practice?

Are your negotiations more complicated than striking a peace deal with North Korea? Are you bribing your kid to do their homework and practice? Should you even be helping your kid with their practice? Does it all feel like a lost cause some days?

There is hope.

This guide will answer many of your questions and give you 16 tips and strategies to help your kid practice.

But first, let's set the framework for our conversation. When I say "kids," I'm referring primarily to beginner music students ages four to nine. However, much of the advice in this guide can be applied to beginner music students of all ages.

Have you found yourself turning into a nag or not the best version of yourself when trying to get your kid to practice? This is normal, and most students don't practice consistently. Self-motivated practice is a discipline—and one well worth learning.

Let's compare music lessons and hockey. While your kid isn't likely to get a concussion in music lessons, one major advantage of hockey is that it has built-in practices for kids. Parents may be exhausted from driving their kids to sports three times a week for hour-long practices. But practice is built into these programs because coaches know that in the beginning, it's hard for kids to practice on their own.

In school, most young children have time to finish their assignments in class. Again, practice is built in. The school tries to cultivate a habit in your child at a young age of coming to school and doing the work.

In music, you usually get one 30-minute lesson a week. Then your child is expected to work and practice independently for the remainder of the week. Most families find this expectation pretty unrealistic for their kids. On top of that, if you don't have a music background yourself, you might feel quite lost trying to help your kid practice. You also know that part of your kid's success depends on you.

Now, if your kid just seems to dislike music and practicing, that's okay. But if you get into a fight whenever it's time to practice and it's a terrifying experience overall, you might want to reconsider the music lessons. Music is not for everyone, nor should it be. In my experience, though, this situation is rare.

Not all kids like school, and they rarely like all of their subjects. And some kids don't seem to like anything. This is normal. They may love gym or recess and hate math. That's fine. I didn't like all the subjects in school but still had to take them. I gained a general knowledge of the subjects and a respect for the professions in those fields.

Kids can learn to have a general appreciation for music even if they don't like it. And it's okay for music lessons to be just a casual experience for music appreciation.

This guide will help reduce your and your kid's stress if you can't seem to get your kid to sit down and practice. You'll find tips and different approaches—and possibly some negotiation strategies—to motivate and help your kid to practice.

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16 Tips and Strategies to Help Your Kid Practice

1. Listen to music.

You may be asking yourself, “What does listening to music have to do with my kid practicing the piano? And how do I deal with my kid not wanting to practice?”

Listening to music is the best bang for your buck—every time.

Let’s say Suzie doesn’t want to practice, and she will tear off Barbie’s head if you make her, and she starts fighting with you whenever you bring up the piano. (True story. Thankfully, Barbie made it out of there alive.)

This is what you do. You say, “We’re going to listen to some music together.” At first, it seems like you’re doing nothing, and your kid thinks, *Well, we aren’t practicing, so I win.* In reality, listening to music is one of the top skills you need as a musician.

This is how you do it. You can start with any piece of music, but I recommend some high-information music like classical, jazz, or world music. By high-information music, I mean pieces with more musical components, complex structures, and a deeper variety in tones. Think composers like Bach, Beethoven, Duke Ellington, and Oscar Peterson.

Listen with no distractions, no multitasking. In this case, music is not turned on as background sound or for entertainment purposes. You sit there with your child. (Don’t worry; your child will eventually learn to listen to music on their own.) You listen deliberately and with purpose. This is difficult, and your child might get bored and possibly violent like Suzie. Start small.

Listen to the piece for 30 seconds, enough to hear some melody and instruments. Ask your child to sing anything they remember. Ask them, “Can you imitate the melody? Can you sing or hum the tune?” This is hard. They probably can’t. Play that small section of the song again.

We need to listen multiple times before we can start recalling the piece and singing back what we heard. Repeat the same section until your kid begins to remember it, then add a second section. Keep adding sections until you’re playing the whole piece.

Listening critically is work. Ask questions like “What instruments do you hear?” “Is it a fast or slow speed?” “How does the music feel? Is it heavy, energetic, slow?” Have your kid sing, dance, and move to what you’re listening to. Is there a beat? There are no wrong answers. These questions are leading to a deeper meaning; they begin to answer the question of how the musical landscape is made.

Listening to music critically and with purpose is some of the best practice you and your kid can do without even touching their instrument. The instrument you are really teaching your kid to use is their mind. They are learning to create mental representations of the music.

If your kid can’t make it to their instrument today, they can always listen to music and sing instead. Your child will start to develop curiosity and a taste for music.

2. Sing.

Yes, sing. That’s all you need to do. I can sum up a bachelor of music degree in one sentence: if you can sing it, you can play it. I say this not to knock the value of the degree. This little saying works on many levels.

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Professional work on inner hearing and being able to imagine the sounds is crucial. We know what red looks like because we've seen it so many times, so now we can imagine it. You want your child to be able to do the same thing with sound. Kids love this and can become really good at it.

Have your kid sing along with the radio, with folk songs, with any music you can listen to. Some people tell me they have no time because they're always driving in the car. I say, "No problem." I completed about 50 percent of my university coursework by listening to audiotapes in the car.

Now, you and your kid aren't just listening for funnies. You're listening so your kid learns to match pitch and builds memory. Once you listen to the first measure of "Baby Shark" (you are free to pick any other material; in fact, I encourage it!), stop the recording and see if your child can recall it. First, ask them to speak the lyrics or notes, then sing it. You'll be surprised at what your kid can recall and what they can't.

An important point about singing back is that you want your child to do it without the recording. Rather than sing-along or karaoke, your kid should be able to reproduce the sounds on their own.

Your child hasn't even sat down with their instrument yet. They won't even feel like they're "practicing." Barbie is still alive.

If you have the patience, you can do this singing and listening practice during car rides. I've had students improve more with this practice alone over the course of a week than students who practiced 10 minutes on their instrument every day. It works.



3. Find a great teacher.

Professionals NHL players still have coaches. Why? Because coaches motivate and can bring out the best in players. The same is true in music. But not all teachers are equal. Do you want Scotty Bowman coaching you or one of the Winnipeg Jets' coaches?

If your child is an extrovert and their teacher is a 70-year-old who focuses mainly on classical music, it may not be the right fit. Sometimes opposites are perfect for kids, but you want to make sure you match energy levels and even music interests if your child has shown a preference.

Determine what goals you and your kid have for music lessons. What are your expectations? What are the expectations of the teacher you're considering hiring? What results has the teacher gotten? Ask the teacher to show you some success stories and transformations. Transformations aren't just for weight loss reality shows.

I would be careful of teachers who **ONLY** want to teach your kid to read notation (the music notes on the page). Sure, this is important, but more so farther down the road.

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We know the results of ear-training systems now. Musicians who play only by ear can have outstanding careers and a great love and enjoyment of music. Musicians who are strictly readers are rare and usually don't survive past Level 6 in the Royal Conservatory of Music program. You need both skills to be a consummate musician, but if I had to pick only one, I would focus on the ear.

Teachers who use principles from the Kodaly, Orff, and/or Dalcroze methods can be very effective with young kids because lessons focus on building your kid's imagination and creating a whole-body transformation in your child.

A great teacher will help motivate your kid for you.

4. Sign up for lessons with your kid.

Why not walk a mile in your kid's shoes? I had some wealthy parents say, "We want our kid playing 'Für Elise' in two months. We're paying big money, and we want to see a return on our investment."

To that I said, "Your kid is spinning himself in the corner while picking his nose. Although that is impressive, we're going to need a little more time."



If you aren't musical yourself, you may not be aware of what it takes to learn and play a complex piece. Take one month of lessons, and you'll understand the levels of difficulty right away. There are levels and different tiers in hockey, and the same is true in music.

I recommend that parents try a couple of lessons themselves. Often, this gives them some perspective, and they find out what the process is. (They also find out that their kid progresses a lot faster than they do!)

Also, music is a great activity the family can do together. I have plenty of kids who started by themselves and then had their parents join them. The next thing they knew, they had a family band. Yeah!

Have a music night as a family. Bring back the great kitchen party. Make some homemade instruments, sing karaoke, and listen to music. Make it one of your family traditions.

5. Have regular home performances.

In hockey, you practice to get ready for the big game. In music, the big game is the performance. Performances can be some of the most fun and memorable experiences kids and families will have.

But many parents get anxious over performances. There are so many things to worry about. I have experienced the opposite with kids. Most kids love performing or are indifferent to it. Often, they learn the fear and anxiety and stress from their parents. That shouldn't be too shocking to hear. Here's a common scenario:

Mom: You ready? Do you know your piece?

Kid: I think so...

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Mom: You should have practiced more. Did you do the dynamics? Were you listening to your teacher? We're running late. There's not going to be any parking....

Kid: Um...

Mom: You're wearing that? Dad is useless.... So, you ready? Everything okay? You're okay? I'll just check in a bit later....

No wonder the kid doesn't want to go and now is starting to feel anxious themselves. Sometimes it's best for the parent not to say anything and just enjoy the ride.

I've found that the more a student prepares, the less anxiety they tend to have. For example, if I tell a kid he has to play "Für Elise" for the recital in four months, there will be some worry. But if I tell him all he has to do is play middle C on the piano, he'll laugh and say he can do it right away. We need to get "Für Elise" to the point where it's like finding middle C. I could write enough about performing to fill a separate book, but the right amount of preparation is arguably the most important strategy for reducing anxiety.

As part of your kid's musical routine, scheduled monthly or even weekly performances are wonderful. They give students and families something to work toward and look forward to. Our school has regular monthly master classes, and we perform for seniors and at hospitals. We also have events where students perform for each other, and sometimes we bring in a guest from the industry.

If you don't have these opportunities, no big deal. Schedule home concerts. Make it a Friday night or Sunday afternoon or whatever works for you. Here's what to do:

1. Schedule the concert a month in advance.
2. Invite family and friends. If the kids are a bit nervous, bring out all their stuffies and set them up as the audience. This works great with the younger ones.
3. Make sure to treat it like a concert. Each performer says who they are and what they're playing, and even tells a joke.
4. After everyone has performed, celebrate!

6. Go to concerts.

Sometimes it's tough to be consistent with practicing. Make your kid's environment a musical one. Go to concerts. There are so many free ones in parks, plus festivals and symphonies. As this becomes part of your routine and family culture, and as your kid sees that you value music as a profession, they will become more motivated to practice. Practicing will eventually become a normal part of their day.

Parents have told me that after taking their kid to see a live hockey game, their kid wanted to try hockey. Your kid may have the same experience with live concerts. Virtual, televised, or live-streamed concerts are options as well.

7. Communicate with your kid's teacher.

Do you remember parent-teacher interviews as a child? Schools would do them once or twice a year. These meetings were helpful because they put a face to a name for both the parents and teacher and brought parents up to speed on their child's progress and the teacher's expectations.

Now imagine if you met on a *weekly* basis with your kid's music teacher. Your child's comprehension, progress, and results would skyrocket!

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You can communicate weekly with your kid's teacher in a couple of ways. It doesn't take much. You can save two to three minutes at the end of the lesson to talk with the teacher. Ask them to explain what the homework is for the week.

You can also ask the teacher to make a short video or audio recording explaining what your kid did in the lesson and what they need to do for homework. Private teachers are usually happy to do this, and it gives kids and parents a reference during the week. It's especially helpful if kids can't read yet or parents can't decipher the teacher's handwriting. If you have questions, give the teacher a call or send them an email.

8. Download music your kid likes.

One of the biggest motivators for kids is finding music they like and then playing it on their instrument. Yes, you can do this at age four. It doesn't even have to be the whole song; it can be just a part of it.

If you create a playlist with all the songs your kid likes, practice time becomes much easier. (And yes, you can have "Baby Shark" and Beethoven's Fifth on the same playlist.) Otherwise, kids are looking for their songs on YouTube for half the practice session. Having them all in one place saves time and energy.

Get your kid a pair of headphones. "Why can't we just have the music playing in the background?" you ask. That's the keyword: *background*. When your kid experiences music personally on their headphones, they can really focus and listen to what's going on in the piece. There are much fewer distractions.

9. Make practicing a reward.

Have you ever bribed your kid? If not, give me a call. I'd love to learn a thing or two!

To bribe or not to bribe your kid is not even a question. It's just part of everyday life in some shape or form. And every family has their equivalent of rewarding or bribing their kids within their own value system.

I've heard it all. "If you don't practice, you don't get dessert" or "you don't get to play video games" or "we won't send you to college and your friends won't like you." It can also be as subtle as not giving as much affection to your child if they don't practice. Rewards aren't always physical in nature; they can be emotional as well.

Now, I am all for bribery and rewards. They do work, and they're what makes the world go around. But there are other ways as well.

The problem is that most parents treat practicing as torture or something kids just have to get through before they can do something fun. Don't schedule practice time before video games or the equivalent fun activity your kid enjoys. Don't threaten to take something away if your kid doesn't practice.

Rather, make practicing itself the reward. You *get* to practice. You get to create and express yourself by practicing your instrument. You get to explore the world and your relationship to it.

Being able to practice an instrument is a privilege and a miracle. It's something you can physically do and enjoy till you're 110. (Yes, you heard that right. Check out the documentary on Alice Herz-Sommer.)

10. Create a practicing chart.

Give your kid a sticker or a stamp on a chart each time they finish their practice. At the end of the week, your kid gets an experience of their choice. They can have candy, rubber duckies, a family bike ride, or whatever floats their boat.

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Keeping track like this is a fun way for your kid to experience their success. With a chart, kids can also visualize and see their progress and have some sense of past, present, and future. As David Allen said, "Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them." When ideas are written out or represented visually, motivation and success come more easily.

It's also hard to remember if your kid has been practicing if you aren't tracking or measuring it in some way. A practice chart solves that problem, with the above added benefits thrown in.

11. Gamify practice with five ducks.

Some kids like rubber duckies or stuffies or coins. You can use these to gamify practice.

Let's say your kid needs to play five notes in a row correctly five times. Every time they play the passage right, move one duck to the right. Continue until all five ducks are on the right. But let's say your kid gets the passage wrong on the fourth time. Oh no! Move all of the ducks back to the left, and your kid has to start over.

Gamifying practice is optional. My father took the old-school approach: "Just stop talking and practice." It doesn't always need to be fun. Nothing abusive here—it's teaching good habits, like helping Mom or Dad with chores.

12. Make a schedule.

Make a schedule? People scoff when I say this. "I know that. Don't you think I know that?!" Some parents have every single 30-minute block of their kid's day planned out. Here's the trick: the schedule is not a prison. Organize the life you and your kid want. Homework and practice should be scheduled in, of course, but be sure to also schedule time for your kid to fool around and relax.

Have your kid create the schedule. "What?" I know, right? "But," you say, "it will be full of ice cream and possibly searching for unicorns." You might be surprised. Kids are craving responsibility and meaning. Have your kid set the schedule, and you enforce it.

I find that once kids connect to the "why" of practicing, they find a deeper meaning in the experience, and this naturally creates more discipline.

13. Practice for fun.

"My kid doesn't even want to practice. Now you're telling me we should practice for fun? What does that even look like?"

Rarely is this even talked about, but it's one of the best tools in your kid's practice. There are practice sessions where your kid needs to play their scales, work on repertoire, do some theory, and so on. But sometimes the session can focus on whatever they want.

Kids need to know that sometimes they can just bang away (to them, it's exploring) and noodle. This is not a waste of time. In fact, it's way more productive than trying to run down the clock or just scrolling on their phones. They are experimenting, which is the birthplace of composing and improvising.

If your kid isn't in the mood to practice, ask them to practice for fun. They will likely end up doing harder and more rewarding work than they would have trying to grind through a normal practice session.

Have your kid pick songs on their own. If your kid picks the repertoire, they are way more likely to learn it. A great teacher will take the hardest repertoire and make it accessible for kids.

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As a parent, give positive attention to your kid when they practice. Sometimes the one question parents need to ask is “Can you play me something? Show me what you’ve been working on.” Take an interest. Ask them to show you something and teach you something. Remind them that it’s an expectation that they play. Show lots of love and support when they do.

14. Practice at different times of the day, and use interleaving.

“But you told me to create a schedule.” Yes. And then also try practicing at different times of the day.

We often want to do things in larger blocks of time. But if we do 5 minutes here and 10 minutes there, it can be more valuable than a slog session of 30 minutes.

Kids can also use interleaving—switching between tasks—in their practice sessions. Let’s say your child has three things to practice as homework from their teacher. Let’s label them Thing A, Thing B, and Thing C.

Traditionally, your kid would practice like this:

A : B : C

That’s fine. This can be effective for some. But have your kid try this instead:

A : B : A : C : B : C : A : B : C

Your kid does the same amount of work but rotates between tasks, going back and revisiting each task multiple times. This method works wonders for retention with some kids. Try treating practice like a Tabata workout—short, focused sessions with specific objectives.

15. Leave the instrument out of its case.

If your kid plays the piano, it’s already out of its case. But sometimes where you put the piano is important. Experiment. Some kids like to practice if it’s in the living room. Some practice more if the piano is in their bedroom. If possible, try different locations to see what works best.

For instruments that come with a case—like saxophone, guitar, and flute—leave the instrument out and visible. Your kid is more likely to remember to play it if the instrument is accessible and always staring at them.

16. Treat music as a competition.

Yes, music can be casual and easy and treated like just another hobby. Kids can learn and play just for the fun of it. Some students don’t even practice and still have a great time and get a lot out of the experience. This is fine and worth the price of admission if you, your kid, and their teacher have the same expectations and the kid is respectful and enjoying lessons.

However, consider treating practice and music as a competition. Some kids thrive in this context. Enter your child in festivals, examinations, and competitions. Your kid may turn into a music athlete. You laugh because the calorie expenditure in a practice session is low, but make no mistake. A concert pianist playing a solo piano work for an hour is heroic, and this is one of the greatest feats of endurance and focus we can accomplish. You need to be athletically and mentally fit to perform at this level.

So basically, if your kid practices and is motivated enough, they could become a world-class musician and make a boatload of money. Crazy things have happened, like the Oilers making the playoffs.

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But seriously, treat music with respect and as an academic subject like history or math. If your child sees you valuing and respecting music and musicians, it will increase their love for music—and their practice time too.

About the author

Jan Janovsky is a dynamic musician and the owner of Classic Studios Music Academy in Sherwood Park, Alberta, Canada. His students have become world-class musicians, composers, pop artists, engineers, tradespeople, and human beings you might want to hang out with. He has taught music to seniors, kids on the autism spectrum, people who are blind or visually impaired, and individuals with a variety of disabilities. Jan's students most often find success in their studies and the joy of music in their lives.

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