**Practice Tips for Parents**

by Richelle Iwanowski

Most children, no matter how much they like playing piano, are going to sulk about practicing once in a while.  Maybe even more than once in a while.  Up to a point, this is perfectly normal.  The trick is getting your child to practice anyway.

Start with a distraction free (or as much as possible) environment.  Turn the TV and computers off, get the other children into another room, and turn off the phone too.  Make sure that your piano is the best quality that you can afford, and that it is in tune and working properly.  There is little more frustrating to the player, or to the listener, than having to listen to an out of tune piano that squeaks or something when played.  Doing these things sets your child up with the best practice environment and gives them the best chance for a great practice session.  If your child were playing soccer you wouldn’t have them kicking around a flat soccer ball would you?  Now...PRACTICE!  Wait...that didn’t work?

Well, let’s find some motivation.  I personally use motivational stories about the Olympic gymnasts who practice for 6-8 hours a day and get up at 4:00 in the morning to do so.  Or how about challenging them to master a tricky section of the music?  If this doesn’t work, I just tell my daughter to practice anyway. I’m the mom, I get the final say.  Sometimes they just need to get over the initial *starting* hump.  Once they get going they are fine.  Ultimately I want her to learn about responsibility.  She made the commitment to piano and practicing, it’s important for me to have her follow through.  In the end, she is *always* glad she did.

Try to convince your son/daughter that they’ll feel better once they’ve practiced...much like going to the gym.  You don’t want to go.  You REALLY don’t want to go, but once you do you’re glad you did.

Inspirational stories that involve your child are great too.  I like to tell my daughter to envision the applause (and one day-the standing ovation!) after a performance.  The rush of knowing that she performed the best she could.  I ask her to picture all the people coming up to her afterwards and congratulating her for a great performance.  It gets her imagination going and makes her feel good.  It is also a goal.  These are all good things!

Again, if this doesn’t work: you’re the grown up and they have to listen to you when you tell them to do something.  In theory.  Otherwise, try these tips:

1.  Set aside a specific time for them to practice.  I know that in the real world this can be difficult.  So, if this isn’t a possibility just make sure that your child DOES practice, every day.  There have been many times (almost daily, as a matter of fact) where I have had to break up practice into 2 or 3 smaller practices throughout the day.

2.  Be supportive.  Don’t yell.  Don’t tell them they’re terrible (that really doesn’t go over well).  Help where you can, but don’t be too easy.  For example, if they ask you the name of the note, don’t just tell them.  Help them figure out what the note is.  Lots of positive reinforcement with encouraging words.  If they do something that sounds really good, ask them to go back and play it again.   This will reinforce the good thing they just did (playing multiple times helps it to stick) and also make them feel like they’ve accomplished something.

3.  Help them come up with a story for the piece they’re playing.  What does it *sound* like?  Does it sound like a boat rowing through a lake in the middle of a moonlit night?  Sometimes the younger children are less interested in knowing that the piece they are playing is meant to be played *scherzando,* than in being encouraged to play something in a playful or joking manner.  Encourage them to perform their pieces... not just play them.

4.  Write out what you want your child to accomplish that practice and how you want them to do it.  Example: “ I want you to play the C- and D- major scales for 2 octaves,  one time legato and one time staccato.  I want you to play this piece hands alone and slow.  Then I want you to try it hands together and a little faster.  Work on this section: it is tricky.”  Spell out the goals and purpose of the practice session.

5.  Your child should practice a certain minimum amount each day as determined by their level of playing and their teacher.  Do NOT tell them they have to practice 30 minutes!  They will spend the whole time clock watching and/or rushing to get things done in that time frame.  I tell my daughter that once she’s accomplished the goals **we’ve** (that’s  important too-let your child help you set the goals) set for the practice, she’s done.  It might take longer than her designated time frame; it might take less time.  More is good...in the case of less, I always tell my daughter to do another run through of her “main” piece.

6.  Do not be afraid to correct something that sounds wrong.  If your child is playing her piece, and something sounds wrong, help them figure out what the problem might be.  Is it a wrong note?  Should it be legato or staccato?  Was the pedal held down too long and the notes clashed?  If it doesn’t sound right to you, it probably is NOT right.  Be constructive, not destructive.

7.  Most importantly-make the practice as fun and interesting as possible, for ALL involved!  Children do their best when supported by a friend or family member.  If you are bored and indifferent as a parent, then your child is probably going to be bored too.  Bribes (ahem, positive reinforcement) are great if used judiciously.  Don’t be afraid to change things up.

8.  Finally, be as involved as possible.  Sit through their lessons with them, this shows support and interest.  Plus, you can hear directly from the teacher how something is supposed to sound and what things your child should work on for that week.  Watching the teacher’s interaction with your child might also give you ideas on how to approach your child at home.  Children don’t always like it when the parents correct them at home and a battle of wills can ensue.  But approaching them like the teacher does might help to smooth over some of the edges.