

THE PRACTICE TRIANGLE

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO PIANO LESSONS



The
CURIOUS
PIANO TEACHERS

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The Author

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In 2015 she formed a partnership with Sharon Mark-Teggart and founded The Curious Piano Teachers. This is an online resource that provides an innovative and inspiring space for piano teachers across the world to meet, share, reflect and grow.

Since its formation, The Curious Piano Teachers has attracted a world-wide reputation for innovation and collaboration.

In 2013 she was awarded a Ph.D from the Institute of Education, UCL. Her topic was the first comprehensive study of UK piano teachers, exploring common practices, expertise, values, attitudes and motivation to teaching.

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Introduction

Being a parent isn't easy; children don't arrive with full set of instructions on what to do when, where and how! Instead you have to guess, stumble and improvise your way through all the ups and downs that go with the role.

Once your child safely makes it to school there's a whole new set of skills to learn. One of these might be supporting your child as they learn to play an instrument. This short guide has been written to help you fill in some of the gaps and answer some of your questions.

Learning to play the piano is one of the most rewarding yet demanding extra-curricular activities. Be under no illusions - playing the piano is one of the hardest skills to learn - ever! As well as the physical complexities of coordination, your child will need to understand how the sounds relate to the symbols on the page, as well as the subtle communication of stories, emotions and colours.

So it takes a long, long time to become an accomplished pianist. It even takes quite a while to be able to play a simple piece hands together, especially when combined with reading from the notation with confidence.

Your role in the process of your child's development as a pianist is absolutely crucial and not just because you are paying for the lessons! Practice is at its most productive when the teacher, child and parent all play their role.

The Practice Triangle that is created by the contributions of all three parties has a powerful effect on the young learner. This short E-book will help you understand your role in this.





The Three (St)ages of Practice

Being your child's practice assistant is particularly important in the initial stages but will change as they pass through the 3 (st)ages of practice.

The three stages of practice are:

- **GETTING THE PRACTICE BUG**
- **FINDING INSPIRATION**
- **BECOMING CREATIVE**

These roughly follow the developmental age of the student.

The next section looks at each stage in a little more detail first from the teacher's perspective and then from the parents.



#1 Getting the Practice Bug

GRACE'S STORY

Grace is a delightful and charming 15 year old piano student. She has just taken and passed her Grade 6 piano exam with distinction.

Both her parents and her teacher are thrilled with the progress she has made in the last six months. Practice has been both self-motivated and well structured. Grace has shown a keen interest in developing her understanding of the baroque style and really worked to capture the rather fiddly articulation of a giga.

This positive progress and self-motivation wasn't always the case though.

Grace began the piano when she was 7 and had lessons at school. This meant that the teacher's contact with Mum or Dad was initially somewhat limited to emails, phone calls or the occasional parent's meeting. Nevertheless both parties worked hard to keep in touch regarding her progress.

Like so many beginners Grace was highly enthusiastic about learning the piano if a little less keen to sit down at home and do the actual practice necessary! On the advice of the teacher a short, regular practice time was set and kept to whenever possible.

When her piano teacher left the school a year into the learning process Grace eventually transferred to lessons at the teacher's home studio. Here teacher and parent were able to have much closer contact with either Mum or Dad sitting in on every lesson and making notes about the work needed for the forthcoming week. So when it became clear that Grace was relying on her very musical ears to work out new pieces but was less happy to read from notation action was take both in lessons and at home.

Gradually, as practice became more routine and established the learning became easier and more appealing. Pieces were learnt increasingly quickly and enjoyment of the learning process increased all round.





Starting off is always exciting and just a little bit daunting!

All piano teachers love the enthusiasm and energy that young beginners bring to their first lessons. It's not always an easy task to maintain this, however, it's more likely to happen if the following lesson conditions are in place.

- A safe, warm, positive and nurturing environment helps children to flourish and it's the teachers job to provide this.
- Lessons should be full of activities such as singing (yes really, as we are all musicians first), dancing and moving, playing and making up stuff as well as what you might normally expect.
- Repertoire is constantly rotating and evolving with opportunities for self-assessment and performance. Although the learning might appear a little messy at times the teacher should have a curriculum or learning plan that they are following and will be happy to discuss with you. Graded music exams might have a place in this but they are certainly not the central objective of the learning plan.
- There is a focus on the young pianists learning how to practise through the use of practice strategies. Your teacher should have a number of these ready to pass on.

The ideal result from all this is that your child will quickly get and sustain the practice bug where success in practice leads to an increase in practice!

This first stage is where you will need to make the biggest investment of your time to make your child's experience of learning the piano a positive and productive one.

There's lots of ways you can help.

HERE'S THE 5 ESSENTIALS FOR PARENTS

#1 ATTEND LESSONS

Sit in on your child's piano lessons. Make sure you and the teacher discuss where you are going to sit and what your role is. For example, it might be useful to establish when you are going to ask questions. During the course of the lesson or at the end? I prefer to have any questions at the end so that the lesson maintains its flow.

Your main role during the lesson is as note-taker. Jot down all the details you hear the teacher and pupil try out or discuss. Although the practice notes from the teacher will give the big picture it's impossible for them to put down all the detail of a 30 minute lesson.

#2 ESTABLISH A ROUTINE

Do you give your child the option of whether they brush their teeth or not? No, I thought not!

Establishing piano practice as a routine, non-negotiable activity is one of the best things you can do - right from the start. Set a particular time of the day (early morning can work very well in some families) and stick to it.

Starting to bargain with piano practice - if you just do your practice then you can go out to play - devalues the whole process and should be avoided. Instead give positive and limited choices. Do you want to start now or have a snack with the timer set for you to start in 10 minutes?

#3 BE PART OF THE PRACTICE

In the early months and years you'll need to find quality time to sit and help with your child as they practice. You can provide the structure for the practice session and, using the notes from the lesson, help your child to move forward and feel they are making progress.

It's best to start with warm ups or the technical work set by the teacher. This can be followed by a review of something already known and familiar before heading into the new and possibly more challenging material. Help your child to remember and apply the appropriate practice strategies used by the teacher. In my studio my students are very familiar with 'goldfish bowl' practice (which isolates certain bars) and 'magic number 3' which encourages them to repeat something three times.

Stick to the teaching approach adopted by your teacher especially if you have chosen them because of this. Piano teaching is changing and moving on in the 21st century and you might find that some things are different from the way you learnt. If you're not sure about the rationale for something (e.g. using landmark notes rather than mnemonics) then ask the teacher to explain.

#4 GIVE POSITIVE AND NON-CRITICAL FEEDBACK

In all this practice help keep focussed on the fact that you are the child's parent and not their teacher! Your role is to provide love, stability and security, rather than criticism. One way of doing this is to focus on the small, positive details.

"I love the way you are sitting today!"

"You look just like a pianist."

"You knew just where to put your hands at the start"

When problems do occur children are very good at finding their own solutions if they are given the space and stimulation to do so. The secret is to avoid telling the child what's wrong and how to fix it. Instead ask open questions such as -

"What would (Sally) say about how to practise that?"

"What could you improve in that?"

"How could that sound even better?"

#5 GIVE POSITIVE CHOICES

Children need to have some sense of ownership of their practice. They are the ones doing it after all! Being constantly told what to do and when limits the development of their self regulation and their motivation to learn.

One way of helping to promote ownership is by giving your child a choice of what they do in the practice time. For example -

"Would you like to do Piece A before or after Piece B?"

"Are you going to do your sight-reading at the start or at the end?"

"Do you want to practice this bar for 2 or 3 minutes?"

Small, and apparently insignificant choices actually have a lot of power. So getting the practice bug doesn't happen by accident on the whole. Instead it's a combination of a skilful teacher harnessing the natural enthusiasm of a child and backed up by a positive and supportive home atmosphere.



#2 Finding Inspiration

GRACE'S STORY CONTINUED

The graded exam system never played a large role in Grace's learning journey although preparing and taking a couple provided good focus points along the way. With the change to secondary school aged 11 life became increasingly busy for her with several other after school activities competing for her precious time. Parental support and encouragement was positive and productive and time continued to be made at home for the piano. The practice continued although sometimes a little patchy when other matters took priority.

It was apparent to the teacher and the parent that finding the right piece to learn was central to motivation and home practice. One of Grace's favourite pieces from this time was View from the Window from Ben Crosland's Cool Beans Vol. 1. Although it was quite a hard and challenging piece for her its lyrical moodiness appealed and practising was never an issue.

During this time she was encouraged by her teacher to start to become more independent. She bought herself a special practice book in her favourite colour and increasingly became responsible for writing up her own lesson notes and practice goals.

As students get older and reach the teenage years their attitude to learning and playing the piano changes - along with everything else!

These can be awkward times all round with students busy seeking approval from their peer group alongside developing their own musical preferences.

For piano teachers the secret is to inspire students and nurture their sense of importance and independence. The young person should be able to see beyond their current playing standard to where their developing pianistic skills might take them.

The lesson dynamics will start to shift with more opportunities for equal dialogue between teacher and student. A variety of activities with playing by ear and improvising will still be happening regularly. Students will want to have some input into developing their learning plan.

Finding the right repertoire is all important at this age. This will mean students learning some 'cool' pieces alongside or even instead of the more traditional repertoire choice.

This might not immediately be appealing to either the teacher or the parent but if it helps the young person keep practising then it's worthwhile.

Teenagers also need to have some sense of independence in the practice process. Something that gives them control over how they are going to practice. This might mean writing their own practice notes in lessons or using a practice app such as Cadenza where they write their own goals and track their progress.

This period is one where students need to be nurtured as musicians, listened to and encouraged by all concerned. It can be a bit tough going at times...!

The parent's role as practice assistant will also need to change. You will need to stand back from what could by now be seen as interference and let your child become a more independent learner.

#1 DROP AND GO

Your constant presence in lessons will no longer be as valuable or indeed as welcome. As your child grows in independence they will want to start taking responsibility for their own learning. Sitting in on every lesson can actually stunt their continued pianistic development and cause resentment. Instead your role at the weekly lesson will be to drop and go.

Checking in with the teacher at the end of lessons to catch up briefly on what's happened will still be valuable. What's more spending a few minutes finding out from your child what happened and what's next on the journey home is highly beneficial.

#2 SETTING GOALS

Back at home setting defined goals for the week's practice will really help give a sense of focus and purpose. These should be established as soon as possible after the lesson. The starting point should be lesson notes which the pupil might have made themselves or via a practice app like Cadenza.

Using statements like 'By the end of this week I will be able to.....' can be so useful for making practice productive - I know because this is what I do for my practice as well!.

Follow the statement with an action verb. Here's a small selection to get you going -

PLAY
COUNT
SING
TAP
FINGER
IDENTIFY
BALANCE
COMPLETE
CHECK
COORDINATE
DECIDE
DESIGN

DELIVER
EXPERIMENT
IDENTIFY
IMPROVISE
LEARN
MOVE
PERFORM
READ
REDUCE
REVIEW
SHARE
SOLVE

STUDY
TEACH
TRAIN
WRITE
LIST
REMEMBER
RECOGNISE
DEMONSTRATE
ANALYSE
CREATE
PLAN
COMPARE

#3 PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

To balance the new and developing sense of independence you will need to meet the ever-shifting and oh-so-subtle emotional needs of your child.

In many ways your role hasn't changed. You still need to provide love, stability and security, rather than criticism although that can be challenging at times! Your child needs to know that you love them whether or not they practise or don't practise their instrument!

Set a time and day during the week to check in with them and find out how the practice has been going. It's really important that during these times, and indeed at all other times, you give positive feedback on what you hear! Continue to avoid giving any critical advice or feedback on what you hear. Instead focus on the positive and on asking lots of open questions such as -

"That bit sounded tricky"

"Any thoughts on what you are going to do to improve it?"

Ideally, be in a different room from where practice is taking place. Find a room that is close by where you can just keep an ear open for what's going on. During the week have some positive phrases up your sleeve to shout out from the kitchen. "That sounded very secure and steady" for example or why not ask your child to play your favourite piece to you? [Click here for access to more ideas.](#)

The teenage years are rarely easy and the last thing that anyone wants is for piano practice to become a battleground and a negotiating tool. So keep it light, stay on their side and keep smiling!





#3 Becoming Creative

GRACE'S STORY CONTINUED

Much to everyone's delight it was clear by this point that Grace had quite an affinity to music and the piano.

She decided to take music as one of her exam options and was always keen to share her latest discoveries about music with her teacher.

So although the learning and progress had been a little bumpy along the way Grace always knew that her parents were fully supportive of her pianistic endeavours. They helped her to get the practice bug when she was younger and later were wise enough to allow her to find inspiration from her own choice of repertoire.

Now she is getting creative they are able to sit back and enjoy listening to their lovely daughter's music-making. Grace has developed a skill and love for the piano that will stay with her all her life and continue to give joy and pleasure to all her family and friends.



The final stage of practice is by far the easiest one parents. If their child (by now almost a young, independent adult) has come this far they are likely to be fairly self-motivated.

Reaching this point means the student is working with the teacher who has probably taken on more of a coaching role. In lessons the student will have quite a high degree of autonomy and ownership of the learning process.

To reach these calmer and self-motivated waters takes time however and for some can be elusive.

At this stage the practice structures that were introduced earlier in the learning process are in place and allow the pianist the freedom and flexibility to create and explore new ideas in their playing. Furthermore, they have the potential to really take ownership of the music and develop interpretations that give them fresh insights into their playing.

Parental support will be reduced to being the No. 1 fan and taxi-driver! You'll have had lots of practice in both roles by now but it is important that you are still as supportive as possible. Your son or daughter might not need you to listen or even ask you too but deep down most will be delighted and appreciate you finding the time to sit down with them whilst they play. Keep any feedback positive and light and avoid just giving a critique.

[CLICK HERE TO READ 7 PRACTICE HATS FOR PARENTS](#)

For the emerging pianist this stage of the practice process is about setting goals both for the longer term and shorter term. The more focussed the goals become with monthly, weekly and daily goals set, the more productive the practice process will be. This is often such an exciting time all round with both teacher and parents seeing and hearing all their patient, nurturing work and care bearing fruit.



Conclusion

Grace's story had a happy ending. The positive working relationship that existed between the teacher, parent and student allowed for discussion, negotiation, compromise and an understanding of each other's positions. This helped to provide a nurturing atmosphere that allowed Grace to find her own space in which to flourish eventually.

Of course, life doesn't always have a happy ending where everything goes to plan. For some children piano lessons prove to be a short-term activity as other competing interests become more popular. And do you know, that's fine as well. Piano teachers recognise that not everyone will keep going in the same way and to the same degree.

What matters most of all is that your child has had the opportunity to play the piano, to make music and to feel its power.

Whilst piano lessons are happening though all the adults in the process should be working together to ensure that the child says -

“

I play the piano because I can, not because I have to.

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