

Huntington Piano Lessons Newsletter

July 2012, by Helena Almborg

Quote of the month

“Practice makes perfect” -- very famous piano player

From my Piano Bench



The other day, I was discussing lack of practice with one of my students.

“Well, I didn’t have time to practice this week, I have a lot of responsibilities.” I was

impressed. “I am in charge of feeding the chickens!” he said proudly. Oh, so I see, this is a time consuming chore and you didn’t have a chance to practice [I was being a bit probing here]. “Yes, the chickens eat a lot, the whole day long and I have to make sure they are not hungry”. The sparkles in his eyes told me he meant what he said.

How can I possibly argue that piano practice is as important as feeding the chickens, walking the dog, going to the pool, or baking cookies? I cannot argue, but I would like to be able to say that practicing is as much fun as those listed above.

The message I got in that scenario is that the kid *wants* to do those things. One of the most important parts of my job is that the student has fun with music when he or shee is with me, and once the student has left my studio that enjoyment towards the instrument doesn’t fade away. Of course it does, just because there are other fun things to do, but I feel that parents have something to do with it.

Parents can, even without noticing, turn their kids away from practicing.

For example, a scenario I read in one of the music books: “To mothers: why your child hates to practice her music lessons.” John Williams’ pictures are

worth a 1000 words, but I will try to explain in less than that :-). The music score or sheet must be placed in front of the eyes for easy reading. Otherwise, it will cause eye strain and discomfort. The feet should be comfortably resting on something: a box, stool, yellow pages. These two little adjustment will result in a relaxed and proper body position.

Is your child comfortable when practicing? Pay close attention to it, young kids would not be able to pick these details out.

Is the height of the bench appropriate? Are the elbows lined up with the keyboard? If they are not, then please add something for the kid to sit on, or raise/lower the bench.

Is there enough light in the room? Please make sure there is good lighting on the piece, that the light is not in the eyes.

Is the space quiet or do you have the TV or the radio on in the next room (or even in the same room)? Practicing takes a lot of concentration, and friends and siblings should minimize distraction.

What I am really trying to say is, whatever is your reason to have your child take piano lessons, give the utmost respect and facilitate and encourage any attempt of practicing.

If your child feels that you think practicing the piano is as important as feeding the chickens, help with the dishes, get good grades in school, then that gives him a sense of responsibility and pride, and he will want to practice just because someone cares.

Special contribution by Denise Schipani, author and mother of two of my students.

I have been sending my sons to Helena for piano lessons for three years. When we made the decision to take up piano, we understood that practice at home would be a major part of the experience. To my mind, there's no point in spending the money or the time on lessons if it's not accompanied by practice -- which is something I tell my sons all the time (seriously, all the time -- just ask them!). Getting two active boys to sit down, nearly daily, at our piano is not easy, but I do my best to not shy away from the parts of parenting that are not easy. In fact, that's a major theme of my new book, [*Mean Moms Rule: Why Doing the Hard Stuff Now Creates Good Kids Later*](#). Our practice routine is not perfect -- the kids grumble and try to get away with as little practice as they can, but because my husband and I are consistent about requiring practice, they know they can only complain so much.

My children are not perfect with practice, and I'm not perfect in requiring it, but we do pretty well. Here are my "Mean Mom" piano practice tips:

1. Be consistent. Just like when the kids were babies, a reliable, predictable routine has the best results. For us, practice happens right after dinner. By then, homework and any after-school activities are over. After they eat (and clear away their plates, and wash their hands!) the boys take turns at the piano. If we can manage about 10 minutes apiece, that's a good day. Some days they get into it and really work on improving their scales or their current piece, and sometimes they race through with the minimum. But my feeling is, any time spent butt-on-bench counts for something, so unless our plans take us out of the house, this is the routine. Period.

2. Don't fear push-back. I have kids who whine about practicing. Big surprise! They also push back over doing homework *now* versus some mythical *later* time; and on putting away their things or getting off the computer. That's what kids do -- they push back, they try to get their way. But our job as parents, I feel, is to stand firm. If you allow your dread or fear over push back to overtake you, you're far more likely to give in. And the minute you give in once, they push back harder. So I say something like, "I know you don't want to, but you kind of have to right now. Just get started."

3. Make it easy for them. The piano is always ready for them, and their piano books are stowed right nearby, either in the bag we carry them to Helena's house in, or in a basket I keep on top of the piano. Just because of the way our house is set up, the piano happens to be in an area they can't miss (as opposed to it being, say, in a little-used room). Having everything they need close by and at the ready feels like a small point, but it's not -- there are no excuses!

4. Have high expectations. I am under no illusion that my children are piano prodigies. But I *do* expect that they will do well at it, whatever their level is; that they'll continue, for as long as we can; and that they'll appreciate and value their ability to play the piano someday. In fact, I think they already do appreciate it, even if they can't or won't articulate it yet. (in fact, they may tell you that piano is "lame," but that's just bluster and an attempt to sound "cool.") They're proud of what they can do. If you expect from the start that they'll do their best and stick with it, your children are far more likely to rise to the occasion.

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