Practice Guidelines

Helpful tips for productive practice time.
Here at The Concord Conservatory of Music, we strive to help our students become thoughtful, independent musicians.

While weekly lessons are an essential tool for musical growth, it’s what happens between those lessons that propels a student to the next level of mastery. In the following pages you will find tips and resources to help structure productive practice time.

I have used many of these tools with my own children and hope you find them helpful, too!

“My two very different musically gifted children have taught me that if the child feels the emotional expression, then playing and practicing will be about learning and perfecting the language of the heart. Playing will have more meaning.”

-Judy Merritt,
mother of a From the Top alum
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Practicing needs to be part of your daily routine, and it needs to be an activity you enjoy!

Creating a special space for practice and entering each session with a positive attitude can go a long way.
Let’s face it, we all have busy schedules, and so do our kids. But we make time for what we think is important and the activities we enjoy. If you or your child is enrolled in music lessons at CCM, we know you value music education and understand its myriad of benefits. To get the most out of music lessons, you need to make a practice routine. Here are some actions you can take to make practicing a regularly occurring activity that is both enjoyable and productive.

**Specific Time**
Carve out a **specific time** for practice. Ideally, this is around the same time each day. It should also be a time where you are alert and energetic, since passive practice can create bad habits and do more harm than good. Remember, even though you have set aside a certain block of time for practicing, only use as much of that time as feels productive. See chapter 2 on *Deliberate Practice* for more.

**Specific Place**
Designate a **specific place** in your home for practice. This area should be free of distractions, and well-stocked with everything you need to learn and rehearse music: a pencil, eraser, metronome, tuner, rosin or extra reeds are just a few examples. Make sure to turn off your cell phone and any other electronic devices that might vie for your attention.
Now that you have a set practice time and place, think about how you approach and begin practice sessions:

- Take a minute before you begin to center and calm yourself. Some easy breathing exercises can help. Try not to worry about what tasks you have to do when you’re done practicing.

- Always warm up before you start working on repertoire. This can include stretches before you even pick up your instrument!

- Plan out your practice session instead of diving in, but don’t micromanage.

- The whole practice session doesn’t have to be spent playing your instrument. For example, you could take some time to listen to recordings of other people performing a piece you are learning.

Remember that you like your instrument and that music is fun! Practicing is challenging, but noticing improvements will build confidence and make practice sessions more enjoyable.
You’ve established a routine where you practice every day. But do you remember what you accomplished in your practice session yesterday?

We all have activities that we go through on autopilot, but practicing your instrument shouldn’t be one of them.
To improve in any activity, you have to know what you are working towards, and what you need to improve in order to reach your ultimate goal.

If you spend practice time just playing each song from start to finish, you are not going to progress very far. But, sometimes it can be hard to figure out exactly what goals you are working towards.

That is why goal pyramids can be a useful tool. At the top of the chart, you write your ultimate goal, and below it you outline all of the steps you have to go through to achieve that goal.

Taking manageable steps towards a goal will make the end-goal appear and therefore become more attainable! Ask your teacher to help you come up with a goal chart for a specific goal.
Chapter 2 – Deliberate Practice

Goal Setting

Use a calendar to outline deadlines for each step.

**Ultimate Goal:**
Perform Minuet No. 1 beautifully and from memory in a recital.

**Step 6:** (Day of Performance)
Center and calm yourself with breathing exercises; visualize yourself performing well and enjoying the experience!

**Step 5:** Play the piece for family and friends. Visualize what it will be like to play in the recital.

**Step 4:** Play the piece from memory in your lesson. Record your performance, listen to it afterwards to hear what you do well and what needs improvement.

**Step 3:** Break the piece into memorizable chunks. Focus on one section for a few days. Then come back to it later to test yourself. Add sections together until you have the whole piece memorized.

**Step 2:** Add in artistic interpretation: dynamics, phrasing, etc.

**Step 1:** Nuts and Bolts. Learn the rhythm, notes, fingering. Make sure you know the piece solidly before you start to memorize.
Helping young ones learn a new skill takes a special balance of patience and encouragement.

It can be extra challenging if you do not posses the skill you’re trying to teach! But never fear, here are some useful tips.
Sit in on your child’s lessons so that you know what her teacher wants her to work on and how. Keep a notebook so that her teacher can write comments and tips.

Be present when your child practices. Help her when she makes mistakes, if you can, or refer to the notebook for help.

Always remain calm and positive. Point out any improvements you notice, no matter how small. Encourage creativity!

Try putting all the tasks that need to be accomplished before the next lesson on separate note cards. Place the note cards in a bowl and have your child pick out three to work on each session. This allows her to feel some autonomy!

Reward milestones. You could give a sticker every time your child masters a passage, memorizes a piece, etc. Once she collects 10 stickers, reward her by taking her to a concert or another fun activity.
As a parent, of course you want to facilitate your child’s musical growth, but you don’t want to push them too hard, right?

Use some of these great pointers from *How Do You Encourage Your Kid Without Being a Crazy Stage Parent?* by Anastasia Tsioulcas, written in the NPR blog *Deceptive Cadence*:

- Keep noisy activities to a minimum during practice time.

- Don’t live vicariously! The focus should be on your child’s experience and perception of music.

- Share musical recordings with each other, and go to concerts together.

- Positive peer pressure goes a long way! Enroll your child in a chamber music group. He will enjoy playing with others and will be held responsible for learning his part.
Resources


From The Top, www.fromthetop.org, NPR Radio Program and PBS Television Program.

How to Get Your Child to Practice...Without Resorting to Violence!, by Cynthia V. Richards, Advance Publications, 1985.
Happy Practicing!

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