

# 15 Things You Need to Know About Supporting Your Child Learning to Play the Piano –

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If you're a parent who has no background in playing a musical instrument it's easy to be overwhelmed by the number of things the piano teacher accidentally takes for granted along the way. Don't be overly worried about this – the teacher won't have enough time in each lesson to fill in *all* the gaps and still keep your child engaged and enthused about their learning, but as time passes you'll become expert at supporting your child's musical education.

Here are the absolute basics that you need to know to be able to support your family's journey into profound musicianship:

1. **You simply cannot miss lessons.** Unless you've just had a car accident, your child has a communicable disease, or your grandmother's funeral couldn't be scheduled any other day. Your child having extra homework that night or wanting a playdate with a best friend simply doesn't cut it as a reason to consider skipping a lesson.

2. **Practice has to happen every day.** Even if it's just for three minutes. The act of *commencing* practice every day precedes the act of engaging in prolonged practice every day! Get your child into the habit of playing her or his instrument daily and to a certain extent the practice will take care of itself.

3. **Practice might not mean playing through a piece from beginning to end.** In fact, practice *rarely* means playing through a piece from beginning to end. The teacher will give your child clear instructions each week as to what is required, and you need to respect these instructions – which means you need to know what they are. Teachers traditionally give written practice notes, but these days some teachers may even make a quick video demonstrating the correct practice approach. Use whatever the teacher gives you as a guide for what will take place that week at home.

4. **You need to have books of music at home.** The best indicator of a child's capacity to develop literacy skills lies in whether the home has books, and the same holds true of musical literacy. If you try to insist that the teacher work from one book instead of three you are deliberately limiting your child's capacity to learn. The price of music keeps changing in today's internet-distributed book economies, but a rough guide is that you should be budgeting between \$A125 and \$A200 (that's Australian dollars) for each child's annual print music spend. Less than that and you know your child isn't making particularly good progress! This amount will change from one country to the next, but I'd suggest \$US80-150 would be about right for students in the US (music is just cheaper in the US, less to pay for postage/shipping), and about £55-90 in the United Kingdom.

5. **Your beginner student child should be learning new music almost every week.** If your child isn't learning new music almost every week (there will be weeks when new music isn't assigned, but these should only be from time to time, not every second week) it means something isn't going right with your child's learning (probably due to issues with practice at home). Talk to the teacher about how you can better support the practice for pieces assigned for a second, third or even fourth week.

6. **Writing the names of all the notes in is a total waste of time and will drive the piano teacher completely nuts.** Sometimes a piano teacher *will* write in the name of one or two notes, but writing in the names of all the notes is like asking your child to read a book one letter at a time: it's boring and it doesn't even make any sense. Being able to read music at the piano is about seeing the shapes and knowing what that will feel like to perform, and even having a clear sense of what it will sound like (the word for that is *audiation* – imagining sound). Don't 'help' in ways the teacher hasn't asked you to – and when you have a brainwave it will almost certainly be a good idea to discuss it with the teacher during the lesson before putting it into action!

7. **The lesson time is when you should talk to the teacher, not afterwards.** The teacher will either have other students, other appointments, or a really short dinner break at the end of your child's lesson. It's not OK to expect the teacher to discuss matters with you outside of the lesson time as a matter of course. Make the odd phone call, feel free to send an enquiring email or text message, but the time directly after your child's lesson is sacrosanct (and not dedicated to you). It might be the teacher's only chance to use the bathroom in five hours. :-) Of course, if the teacher wants to talk to *you* then by all means, chat away, but don't assume that the teacher has this time available otherwise.

**8. Just because you need to remind your child to practice does not mean that they don't want to practice or that they don't want to play their instrument.** Just as you don't give your children the option of failing to brush their teeth, bathe, eat or get dressed, so doing practice is not optional, even if that means you remind your child to do it every day for a decade. You are the parent: you make the rules. No one ever reached adulthood and said "I wish my mum had let me stop learning the piano"...

**9. Think long-term.** In other words, don't plan to 'try' piano for six months to see if it's a good fit – if you want your child to learn to play the piano you need to be internally committing to at least three years of lessons and practice. *Then* you can reflect on how things are going. This isn't about being a tiger parent, it's about being realistic about what's involved in gaining musical skills. That 10,000 hour rule? You can have an awful lot of fun during that first 100 hours of piano practice, but you're still only 1% of the way (if that) toward being amazing.

**10. You may not realise how easy it is to play the piano, and at the same time how hard it is.** There are very cool things students can easily learn to do at the piano which may give you the impression your child is a genius. Feel free to enjoy this sensation, but don't be disappointed if the next week your child reverts to just being the cool, fabulous kid that you know and love. Some things that pianists do that appear easy are actually very hard, and some of the impressive things pianists do are ridiculously straight-forward to execute (if your teacher just shows you how).

**11. If you want your child to learn to play the piano, then get a piano at home for your child to practice upon.** Seems kind of obvious. Sometimes there are great reasons why you end up choosing to buy a digital piano, and these days there are just fantastic digital pianos available. But often parents choose woefully inadequate pretend pianos and think it will be as good: it won't. If you can't afford lessons AND a piano then postpone lessons for six months and use the savings to buy a decent instrument (digital or acoustic). Practicing on an inadequate instrument will set your child back by years in the long run – get this sorted as quickly as you possibly can.

**12. Grab every chance you get to sit in on your child's piano lessons.** You will be a hundred times more likely to be able to support your child's practice if you've been observing the teacher working with your child throughout the lesson – from how to use the body (shoulders, elbows, wrists, fingertips, proper seating position, etc.) to how to practice each piece to getting to understand the lingo (staccato, arpeggio, inversion, etc.). You have the chance to get your own free tutoring just by sitting in on your child's lesson!

**13. Participate in studio recitals every chance you get.** You will be amazed how much your child is motivated by playing at and attending recitals – they get to hear music being performed by more advanced students, and they begin to build programs of pieces they are comfortable performing. And don't project any nervousness you may feel onto your child – children don't know they are supposed to feel nervous unless you tell them (or they have an anxiety disorder, which is a completely different matter), and you have an opportunity to develop confident public presentation in your child in this musical setting.

**14. Don't believe everything you read on the internet.** This one makes me smile, of course, because one assumes you're reading this on the internet, and believing it. :-). The truth is that your teacher is going to be able to give you much better advice for *your* child than you will find chatting to random people/teachers on an internet forum or by searching YouTube for tutorials. If you don't have a background in playing a musical instrument you won't know what to trust and what is nonsense. Find a reputable teacher who you trust and like, and get educated (along with your child) and develop your capacity for discernment.

**15. Share what you know about your child with the teacher.** Does your child have a morbid fear of spiders? An allergy to cats? A learning disability or a processing disorder? Don't wait for the teacher to figure it out by themselves – by sharing what you know about your child you won't be preventing the teacher from building a positive relationship with your child, you'll be facilitating immediately great learning experiences. Thing is this: piano teachers are fairly canny – because playing the piano is so holistic a learning activity you might even find that the piano teacher is alerting you to quirks in your child's learning behaviours that will help you finesse their school-based learning! Piano teachers are often the first to notice problems with vision, dyslexia, problems with proprioception, processing problems, pronounced learning styles (which may be the basis for trouble in the classroom), even synaesthesia, simply because they are spending 30, 45 or even 60 minutes one-on-one with your child, and maybe this is the first chance your child has had for that kind of regular, professional adult attention. You and the teacher are a team working to make your child the best person he or she can be. :-)

Follow these 15 guidelines and you'll find that you are fast-tracking your family's musical development! Enjoy the transformation!