

PARENT GUIDE

How to Help Your Child Enjoy and Succeed at Piano Lessons

By Joseph Hoffman, M.M.



HOFFMAN
ACADEMY

Dear Parents,

Welcome to piano lessons with Hoffman Academy! Get ready to begin a wonderful musical journey with your child. This guide will provide you, the parent, the information you will need to make these lessons a success. Your job at home is to fill the role of Daily Practice Partner—a very important role. But don't worry—this guide will provide you all the structure and information you need to be a great Daily Practice Partner—and, by the way, you don't need to have ANY prior musical experience to be a super Daily Practice Partner.

All you really need is the following 3 Skills:

- **Ability to schedule and consistently carry out a daily practice session with your child.**
NOTE: You won't be sending your child to the piano to practice alone for the first year of lessons. Especially for younger children, these practice sessions should usually be done TOGETHER, as a child-parent team. For beginners, usually 10-20 minutes each day is enough to make good progress. For children with shorter attention spans, you can try dividing practice into shorter sessions 2-3 times a day.
- **Ability to not over-correct your child.**
One of the fastest ways to kill motivation in a child is to repeatedly tell them they are doing something wrong. Yes, I want your child to play correctly, but the FASTEST way to achieve excellent playing is to engage the child's OWN DESIRE to play well. As a parent, this means getting out of the way, not talking and correcting so much, and letting the child learn and discover at his or her own pace.
- **Ability to keep practice sessions fun and positive.**
Keep practice time light-hearted and fun, and your child will keep coming back for more—willingly! Try using the Practice Games I describe later on, which will help keep practice sessions fun. Also, remember the power of positive language. Be generous and warm with your praise, while also making it specific and sincere.

If you will consistently focus on these 3 Skills (even if you aren't perfect at them 100% of the time), you will have what it takes to be a fantastic Daily Practice Partner. And the more you work at developing these 3 Skills, the better you will become. When you combine quality teaching (our job) with a committed Daily Practice Partner (your job), I guarantee that you are going to be amazed at the unfolding of your child's musical ability. Your investment of time, commitment and energy is going to be hugely rewarded. You are going to give your child the priceless gift of a lifetime of music making! Now, let's get more specific about developing and succeeding at each of these 3 Skills.

SKILL #1:

Ability to schedule and consistently carry out a daily practice session with your child.

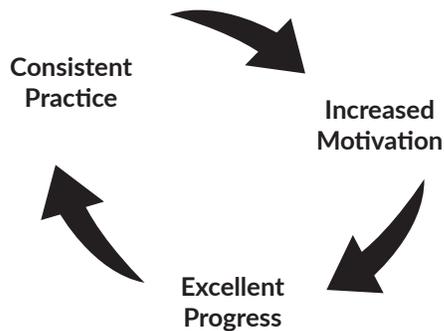
To succeed at this skill, daily consistency is the real key. Let's do some quick math to see why consistent practicing is so critical to your success. We're going to compare a student who practices every day for 20 minutes (Student A) with a student who practices just twice a week for 20 minutes (Student B). Each week, Student A will rack up 140 minutes of practice time, while Student B gets a total of only 40 minutes. Now let's multiply this across a year of practicing:

Student A	140 minutes per week	X	52 weeks	=	7,280 minutes
Student B	40 minutes per week	X	52 weeks	=	2,080 minutes

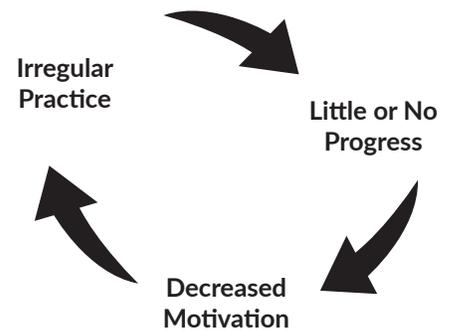
Based on the math alone, we could predict that Student A will probably have made more than **THREE TIMES** the progress of Student B during the year. Sadly, the reality is even worse for Student B than the math would tell you—it is very possible that Student B will not be making any substantial progress at all! The reason is every time Student B does manage to sit down to practice, most of the time is not spent developing new skills, but rather simply trying to remember what was learned last time. Whatever little progress is made is lost in the days that go by in between practice sessions.

I have taught several “Student B” students, and my experience is that they do not last long. Most will want to quit within just a few months. The reason? It is impossible to enjoy learning the piano when there is no progress or very little progress. On the other hand, a student who does practice regularly is going to be achieving new levels of skill, almost daily. This student will be excited about his or her progress, which will, in turn, make it even easier the next day to feel like going to the piano to practice. The greatest destroyer of motivation is lack of progress. The greatest creator of motivation is success. If you want your child to stay motivated and to love playing the piano, then you must set him or her up to make steady, consistent progress. This means regular daily practice.

Here's a little formula to remember:



The opposite is true, too:



Below, you will find a few more tips for making daily practice successful:

- Schedule a specific time for practicing every day, then stick to it. Readjust and recommit as many times as necessary.
- Make sure there are a minimum of distractions during practice time, such as TV, etc
- Some children may respond well to a reward system linked to daily practicing. The thing I don't like about reward systems is that they can distract a child from the TRUE reward—which is the satisfaction of being able to play the piano well. However, occasionally a child needs a little motivation “boost” and a reward system that is simple and well-defined could be just the answer. Here's one example: seven consecutive days of practicing earns 10 points. 20 accumulated points earns a candy bar. 50 points earns a trip to the store to get ice cream. 100 points earns some bigger item. Choose whatever system will be most motivating to your child (it's a good idea to ask for their input). Keep it simple, and don't let it replace the natural reward which is the enjoyment of making musical progress.

To conclude, it is my experience that the surest way to predict success is NOT the student's musical “talent” but by how consistently the student practices.

SKILL #2:

Ability to not over-correct your child

There is this funny urge that parents have around piano practicing. I call it “over-correcting”. Kids would probably call it, “You're bugging me!” As I have discussed this issue with my students, the overwhelming message that I hear is that kids find it very annoying to get too much feedback from

Mom or Dad while practicing. The funny (and sad) thing is that even parents who are perfectly intelligent and socially adept can often fail to notice how their over-correction is hurting the situation much more than it is helping.

The key is to listen and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues you are getting from your child. Believe me, if your feedback is not welcome, your child will let you know either verbally or through body language. And if your feedback is not welcome, it's time to back off. If you don't, things are likely to escalate in a negative direction and practice time will no longer be the enjoyable experience we want it to be.

Now, I'm not trying to say you should never give feedback. That would go against the whole concept of having a Daily Practice Partner. Again, the key is to listen and watch the reactions of your child, and to find a good balance between commenting and not commenting. Use your child's reactions as a kind of meter to know how you are doing. Remember, we want music making to become something that your child LOVES, so don't make practice time something they dread by being a nag.

A few helpful principles and ideas to keep in mind:

- Provide at least 5 positive (sincere and specific) comments for every 1 corrective comment.
- When providing a corrective comment, focus on just one thing at a time, rather than bombarding with multiple issues.
- Frame corrective comments as gentle suggestions, not stern commands or criticisms. Say: "Maybe let's try slowing down a little this time", rather than: "SLOW DOWN! You're playing so sloppy!"
- When child succeeds in making a correction, make sure you take time to celebrate that achievement together before moving on to another problem. For example: "Good! You played the whole song without missing a single note. [make eye contact and give a warm smile] Now, this time let's scoot back on the bench and see if you can do it again with good piano posture."
- Sometimes it is best to remain silent about something.
- A child learns best when discovering things for him/herself. Too much feedback or correction causes a child to essentially turn off his/her brain and stop learning. This is often called "shutting down". You've probably seen this and know what I'm talking about.

- Remember, helping your child stay motivated is more important than being right.
- Kids love reversing roles. Allow them to take a turn being the one to give feedback
- about your playing. Feel free to playfully make mistakes on purpose and see if they can “catch” you.

If you are doing Skill #2 right, it may feel like you are biting your tongue a lot. And it may in fact drive you crazy to not say some of the things you want to say. But, in the long run, the reward will be a motivated child who likes practicing, rather than a frustrated child who wants to quit. The choice is yours!

SKILL #3:

Ability to keep practice sessions fun and positive your child

Kids love games. Even kids with major attention problems are often able to remain 100% focused when trying to win a game. Use this to your advantage during practice sessions. Rather than boring, endless drilling, use a Practice Game!

Here are two simple Practice Games to use often:

- **Play Your Age.** To win, the student must play one line or phrase of a song with no missed notes as many times as his/her age. (Adults and students over 10 years old can stop at 10.) The Practice Partner keeps track of points by placing a penny or small piece of candy on the music stand every time the student plays the phrase correctly. When you have earned as many points as your age, you win! **WHEN TO USE:** This is an excellent game for the first few practice sessions after learning a new song.
- **Win One, Lose One.** This game is basically the same as Play Your Age. To win, you still have to earn as many points as your age (or 10 points—whichever is lower). The only difference is that you **LOSE** one point for repetitions with one or more wrong notes (**NOTE:** you can't go below zero points). When you take a point away, don't say a word—just take it away and notice your child's reaction. You will be surprised to find that most kids will actually smile the first time this happens. They love the challenge and will often persist at this game for many, many repetitions in order to win! If a child cannot win after 5 minutes, praise the child warmly for concentrating so well, and suggest that perhaps we should try winning the game next time. **WHEN TO USE:** Since this game is more

challenging, only try this game AFTER the student is starting to have some confidence with the notes, but still needs some polishing work. This game is also a great choice for students who thrive on a challenge.

When doing a Practice Game it is VERY IMPORTANT that you keep the spirit playful and fun. Games provide their own feedback, so you don't really need to give much verbal feedback (praise or correction) during a Practice Game. Just let the points speak for themselves, and watch how well your child can focus when you get out of the way. If it seems like a child could use a break or if you need some laughter, try switching roles, and allow the child to award or take away points while the parent plays. (Be sure to make some mistakes and make a big deal when they take a point away!)

In addition to making practice time FUN, remember to use lots of POSITIVE language. Try to look for things to praise at least as much as you look for things to correct. Even a child who is playing many wrong notes can be praised for concentrating or for trying his/her best. When offering praise, remember that the most meaningful praise is specific and sincere. As mentioned already in connection with Skill #2, you should maintain at least a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative comments in order to help your child have a positive feeling about piano practicing. By all means, avoid scolding and lecturing. Focus on your child's progress. Focus on the joy of music. Use positive language, keep a playful, light-hearted spirit, and have lots of fun!

SUMMARY

Let's review the 3 skills you need, just one more time:

- Help establish a consistent daily practice routine
- Participate meaningfully in practice sessions without over-correcting
- Help make practice sessions fun and positive

Learning music is like learning a new, highly complex language. It will demand a lot of patience, dedication, and love from you as a parent. However, I am 100% certain that you will be always grateful for making the investment in your child's musical development. Your child will develop musical talents, awareness and appreciation that will enrich him or her for life!