

# LEARNING THE PIANO: 10 IMPORTANT POINTS EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW

## *THE FIRST PIANO LESSON AND BEYOND...*



Just seeing the look of wonder and joy on the faces of young students at their first lesson, makes my heart sing. While each student and I explore the sounds that the piano makes, when I look up, I see the child's parent, whose face shows that they, too, clearly love the experience! Speaking with each parent afterwards, got me to thinking about the important points that they and every parent should know about learning the piano. Here they are:

## **1 – Learning for Life**

How lucky we are that music is something that will be with us all throughout our life! It brings us joy and it moves us, emotionally, into places that can be hard to reach otherwise. Learning the piano is so much more than just learning to play a piece of music or taking an exam. Instead, my goal is to instill a life-long love of music and a way of expressing thoughts and emotions through the instrument.

**2 - Your children will do so much better on a home instrument that is enjoyable to play** – Much of the pleasure from playing the piano comes from one's ability to emote feeling, nuance and expression through music. Even young beginners will experience great satisfaction from making beautiful sounds.... so make sure to have an instrument that gives them the best opportunity to make beautiful sounds. Guidance from your children's teacher will help you find an affordable piano, if you don't already have one, (don't worry, there are many great and affordable options) that will give your children the tool they need to truly experience piano lessons. An investment in a good instrument protects the investment you are making in your children's musical education.

**3 - Creating the Right Conditions** - If you want your child to flourish musically, the right conditions need to be created in the home environment.

- Is the piano tuned regularly?
- Is there a bench to sit on that's at the right height and a stool on which to rest the feet?
- Is the room warm and inviting, with good lighting?
- Is the piano placed in a location that is both quiet but not isolated from the main action of the house?

I know it isn't always easy to get all these conditions in place in a busy household but they all make a difference and are worth considering.

**4 - Your children need you to establish a routine** – Piano practice that happens every single day is by far the most effective practice structure. 30 minutes three times a week is just 90 minutes. 20 minutes seven days a week is 140 minutes. The total difference is 43 hours of missed practice per year if your children are only at the piano three times a week!

I recommend finding a suitable time of the day for a regular practice slot and integrating it into your child's timetable. **Piggybacking practice onto another fixed, daily activity** is an easy way to make sure practice happens. Practice as a practical arrangement rather than an ongoing, emotional negotiation – which can be draining for everyone – will really help it to be a positive experience. Setting a regular time of day when piano practice happens “no matter what” will ensure that a daily practice routine is easy for your children to maintain. Learning the piano is a complex activity requiring many different skills to be learnt and understood, and is one of the hardest things your child will ever undertake. But, oh, the sense of accomplishment your child will feel! Piano is one of the first times in his or her life that your child will have the experience of really seeing their progress and of getting out of something exactly what they put into it - important life lessons!

Short, focused and regular visits to the piano help your children retain and understand what they are learning while making the most of generally short attention spans. If practice is enjoyable, rather than arduous, your children will naturally (and unknowingly!) increase the time they spend on the bench.... And, as you know, I am not a proponent of tracking minutes practiced - we go by goals met. This gives the student some needed ownership of his or her piano journey and is very important. 10 minutes one day, 15 minutes another, 40 minutes another - the important aspect is to get to the piano each day.

Help your children avoid “cramming” the day before lessons. Stick to your daily routine to avoid weeks of forgotten practice (which lead to feelings of inadequacy on the part of your children and can be the catalyst to a downward spiral of not wanting to play piano at all). Music is joyful... and so practicing music should be as well. This is, fortunately, something that you are able to create easily with a commitment to regular practice.

**5 - Supporting Your Young Artist** - *Your children will need help* – up until about age 11, children need hands-on help with home practice. And even though you, yourself, may not read music or play the piano, your assistance is still very much needed! Parental help can take the form of reading lesson notes, organizing practice time wisely, providing encouragement through difficult sections or situations, and seeking out answers for “I’m stuck on this” problems. Asking a young child to be in charge of something as important as piano practice is often asking too much. Your help at home will make a substantial difference in your children’s progress. The common denominator of almost every great musician is great parents who supported their child during their musical development.

## **6 - Encouraging Curious and Playful Practice**

Instead of thinking of practice as a boring activity, let’s think of it as an exploration, an adventure that is full of surprises and delights. The practice of experts is full of curiosity and a sense of playfulness and, although young children will need help and guidance, this same approach can be encouraged from the start. For example, you can help them to ask questions about what they are learning – what passage are you going to play? Why are you going to play it? How are you going to play it? How slowly can you play it? What happened? Why? etc.

Also, think about how you can encourage a wider love of music beyond the piano lesson. Do you play different styles and genres of music at home or could you take your child to local concerts or festivals to hear others play? There is nothing like hearing a live musician to inspire and motivate all of us.

**7 – Students Learn at Their Own Pace** - At Marin Piano Studio, I emphasize students' receiving a firm and secure foundation in their pianistic skills. We don't rush the early stages as all the different components have to be established. There are musical concepts to be learnt, technical skills to be mastered, reading skills to be developed, musical sensitivity to be nurtured – and that's just for starters! Early piano lessons are just as much about developing musicianship skills as about 'learning' the piano so expect to hear singing as well as playing. You will also find that the different skills come on at different rates. For example, the ability to play the piano can develop quite quickly whereas establishing secure note reading often takes a bit more time. Experienced teachers know this and create an individual program for each pupil, allowing the different skills to develop in their own time with the appropriate support and back up.

### **8 – Making Progress**

There is a great sense of accomplishment gained by students as they quickly master their pieces. Of course, this takes time during home practice. I teach your child for a set amount of minutes per week, and then, he or she is the one who LEARNS the piano at home. The lesson books and supplementary material that I choose for your child encompass all aspects of musicianship: from note reading, theory concepts, chords, scales, composition and improvisation. A true enjoyment of playing the piano is the ultimate aim.

**9 - Your children need lots of encouragement** – Learning to read music and play the piano can be difficult; it can be discouraging... it

can feel overwhelming. Your children (no matter what their age) need loads of encouragement. And not just verbal encouragement. You can show your children that you value their efforts by attending their recitals with enthusiasm, inviting friends and family to listen to them play, and taking the time to sit and listen to them practice with your undivided attention.

### **10 – Communicating**

Your children need you to communicate with their teacher – Working as a parent/child/teacher triangle is the optimal way to ensure progress and success in piano lessons. Be sure to communicate often with your children’s piano teacher. Check in on how lessons are progressing, ask for help if something is difficult for your children at home, let your teacher know when practice weeks have gone extremely well (and not so well). Working as a team means your children are supported equally on all sides at all times.

### **Finally, the Pleasure of Being a Piano Parent...**

Learning to play music is a life-changing experience. And, as a parent, the process is a thrill to watch. Being a major part of this accomplishment is incredibly rewarding! The profound pleasure of being a “piano parent” far outweighs the required extra efforts; and this is, by far, the most important aspect that piano teachers want parents to know.