

How to Inspire Your Child to Musical Success: The Third Way

In the world of music study, there are two basic ways parents approach practice. One may be a strict enforcer of regular practice...it happens every day or else! Another may have a laissez-faire philosophy...not the best for teaching responsibility. However, there is a third way which helps to build the child's interest and self-motivation.

The child who succeeds at music and is self-motivated is surrounded by a nurturing musical environment in the home. Here are some ideas to create this environment. Not all parents can or will do all of these things all the time, but you can use these ideas as inspiration when needed. Usually, there is a "honeymoon period" of the first few months when the child is "in love with" the piano...but after a time, you may need some fresh ideas. Incentives go only so far before burning out. Don't wait until the point of desperation before changing tactics. Consistent use of these ideas will help make your child one who loves the piano.

- If your child's music book comes with a soundtrack, be sure to play it regularly. Bedtime and in the car are good places to establish a routine listening time. Trying to play a piece of music without ever hearing it is like putting a puzzle together without ever seeing the complete picture on the box. Have them listen to the new piece just before practicing it.
- Play recordings of beautiful music, including classical, and any other styles you like. In our society, classical music is not often heard. Exposing your child to it will help him to feel that it is the norm rather than something unusual or outdated that only piano students play. Recommended local radio stations: WRTI 90.1 FM (classical and jazz), WXPB 88.5 FM (eclectic mix of pop/rock, world music, specialty shows such as folk, children's, etc.). These two have the bonus of being non-commercial. Also, there are classical radio stations available over the Internet, including www.beethoven.com/, as well as Pandora, Spotify, etc. Consider putting beautiful music on an MP3 player.
- Take your children to concerts. A high school orchestra concert is inexpensive, so you can leave whenever your child's attention is spent. Other good choices are West Chester University music professor recitals, Chester County Youth Orchestra, and Kennett Symphony Orchestra.
- Arrive early or stay late for your lesson and sit in on other students' lessons. It's amazing what your child can pick up from hearing other lessons. This is also very motivating. Your child will see that she is not the only one who takes lessons and has to practice. She will hear pieces that she would like to learn, and also can play duets with the other student.
- In the car on the way home from lessons, discuss what piece or skill your child worked on. Encourage her to play it again at home that same day. Research shows that doing newly learned things later the same day transfers the information to the brain's long-term memory much more readily. The longer time has gone by, the more re-learning has to happen.
- Take advantage of group activities. Make it a point to participate in recitals and any group lessons or camps that are available. Being in a peer group of musicians is very inspirational and feels like a we-thing instead of a me-thing.
- The parent who does not take the child to lessons can ask him what he has learned that week. Ask him to play it for you. Have a weekly home "concert" at a relaxed time, perhaps Sunday evenings.
- Talk to other piano parents at lessons and recitals. Participate in online discussions on the Internet. Share ideas, challenges and solutions.

- Keep all comments positive. Refrain from negative comments. For example, instead of pointing out errors, look for good points to comment on. Rather than, “Keep your wrists level for the whole song,” you can say, “Great! Your wrists were level for the first phrase. Can you keep that up?” Praise should be specific. Instead of “good” or “better”, find one point to praise, such as, “That sounded very smooth,” or “lively”, or “it’s getting easier for you.” Try not making any judgments at all, or only statements that begin with “I” (“I liked...”.) Ask what he needs to remember in the piece...one thing at a time.
- When commenting on other students, refrain from comparisons. For example, instead of saying, “Look how quickly Josh has gone through the same book as yours; you could go as quickly if you practiced more”, you could say, “Josh really seems to enjoy playing that piece”, or “What piece are you looking forward to in your book?”
- Consider hosting an informal “piano party” in your home with some of the other students.
- Remember that all things will pass (including a slump) and nothing works forever. Ask your teacher for help in the form of new music or practice games to make it more fun. Speak to your child as you would like to be spoken to. Music is a universal language of love and joy that surpasses words...Let the music itself inspire your child to achieve great things.

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