

DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD THROUGH SUZUKI STUDY

From Summer 1995 Suzuki Association of the Americas Journal

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The study of an instrument through the Suzuki method is the vehicle by which we can train children in numerous skills that they will use throughout their lives. Thus, the study of the Suzuki Method becomes a way to develop the whole child. For this article I have isolated eight abilities that Suzuki students develop in studying their instruments. Any one of these is well worth the cost of years of lessons. The words ability and talent are used interchangeable in Suzuki philosophy to mean one's capacity to think, act or feel in a given situation. Thus, Suzuki says a child can develop the ability for being considerate or happy, as well as the ability to produce a good tone. In an effort to encourage and educate the parents that attend my seminars, I tell them about the power of the Suzuki Method to develop the following eight abilities in their children.

THE ABILITY TO LISTEN

Through their Suzuki study, children develop the ability to listen, opening up expanded opportunities for gathering information and knowledge. Children who listen attentively do well in school. In addition, if children stay in the Suzuki Method long enough to develop a habit of focused listening (this is, concentrated listening to oneself while playing), they will have developed listening ability that extends to all areas of their lives. In the long run a person's ability to have successful personal and professional relationships depends heavily on one's ability to listen.

I asked some of my older students the question, "How has the listening ability you developed through your Suzuki experience helped you in other areas?" Paul (fourteen) replied, "The Suzuki Method has helped me to listen better to my teachers and coaches." I pay attention more and do better with my school work."

Another student answered, "I have been studying Suzuki piano since I was four years old and I see a big difference between Suzuki and non-Suzuki students. I seldom see anyone in my class at school or on my sports teams who seem to stop and listen when something is being said by the teachers or even by another student. People in general seem to know more about talking than they do about listening. However, whenever I am around Suzuki students, I notice their ability to listen to others, I suppose because they have spent so much of their life tuning into music. This probably accounts for them being better students in school. It also makes them a lot more fun to be around."

THE ABILITY TO OBSERVE AND IMITATE

Suzuki students learn to play their instruments through observing and imitating their parents and teacher. Dr. Suzuki was just obeying the laws of human nature when he suggested that children learn music the same way they learn their native language. Daniel Kohut, professor music at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has done considerable research on the process of learning through observation and imitation. He says, "Imitation involves trying to reproduce the mental images stored in our brain through live performance. In the simplest terms it means mimicking the actions of another person. How do we acquire the ability to imitate? We don't

have to acquire it. We already have it; we were born with it. Without it we would never have learned how to walk and talk.

Imitation is the principle means through which we learn to interact with and adapt to our environment. In order to imitate, we need a performance model. Can you imagine trying to learn to ride a bicycle if you have never seen anyone else do it? In time you would no doubt figure it out, but why do it the hard way? The same applies even more to complex skills, such as learning to play a violin. Nature provided us with eyes and ears, which possess incredible potential. We should use them fully for learning, as nature intended."¹

We know children are successfully learning basic life skills like walking, talking, dressing and eating through observation and imitation. Skills such as those in baseball, tennis, basketball, bike riding, skiing, aerobics, etc., should also be taught this way. Recently I felt compelled to tell my aerobics instructor, "Please stop talking and just show us," as our class struggled to learn each new step he dutifully explained in detail. Once he stopped talking and interfering with our ability to concentrate on what we were seeing, we learned very quickly. There is little need for verbalization in learning many skills.

I asked one of my thirteen-year-old students if she felt that she used the abilities of observation and imitation learned in her Suzuki study in other areas of her life. She said, "Many of the non-Suzuki students I know aren't able to observe details, to observe beyond the most obvious in a given situation. The other day a girl was giving a report at my school and I observed many details of her presentation. This helped me because when I presented my report I used some of the techniques I had seen in her presentation. I think I learned how to observe even the smallest details from learning to play music where there are so many details to perfect." A high level of ability to observe and imitate seems to enhance all learning.

ABILITY TO MEMORIZE

Suzuki students first acquire the ability to memorize music through their ears. It is only after they learn to read music that they memorize through their eyes. My own observation of students over the past twenty-five years indicates that the ability to memorize patterns in sound carries over to memorizing patterns on the printed page. I find more and more Suzuki students with very quick visual memory as well as quick aural memory. It may be that the brain learns how to memorize by patterns, and it does not matter whether those patterns are aural or visual. The ability to memorize printed material seems much easier for Suzuki students who first memorize aurally.

When I asked my older students if they were using any of their memorization ability in the classroom, the answer was an unanimous "Yes." One student said, "I can memorize almost anything easily. When I am studying for tests, I read the information over a couple of times, and I have it memorized." A second student replied, "I have a really good memory. It is easy for me to remember instructions and due dates. Science terms are easy as pie. This would never have happened if I had not had Suzuki instruction. I would be like so many other kids in my class who struggle to memorize."

In a seminar of seventy-five parents, I once asked, "What is the single most important ability you think your children are developing through their Suzuki experience?" Eighty percent of the parents replied, "The ability to memorize."

THE ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE

An ability worth its weight in gold to a student is the ability to concentrate and this is the first ability that I help my students develop. Those first lessons where the child is only able to stay at the instrument for a few minutes are critical in the development of concentration. Forcing a child to stay at his practice longer than he is interested and focused only makes him develop the ability NOT to concentrate. Since concentration in large part determines the quality of the work a child does as well as how quickly the child grasps and retains an idea, it is probably the single most important ability a young child can develop.

My daughter Tracy attributes her ability to get into a deep, concentrated state to her early study of the piano. Now as an adult (age 26) she explains that it was in performing at the piano as a child that she first experienced a total focus of mind and body into a state of perfect concentration where action happens naturally, and where an effortless almost unconscious performance is possible. Athletes call it being "in the zone" or "playing over their heads." Essentially it is a totally focused, connected form of concentration where one is oblivious to everything and everybody that allows us to do the impossible in a very natural way. This state allows a person to truly do what he has the potential to do at that moment. Most people never actually get to the point where they perform up to their potential simply because they never experience this deep concentrated state. Suzuki kids learn how to develop the ability to lose themselves in concentration if they start early with concentration development.

As a Suzuki teacher I do exercises with my young students as first lessons so that they can tie physical experience of concentration with the word. After they make this connection, a parent or teacher only has to say "Concentrate, please," and they will be able to focus their energy on the task at hand. It has been my experience that saying, "concentrate" to a child is useless unless we teach them to connect the word to a state of being.

THE ABILITY TO PERFORM

Another ability that students develop from their Suzuki experience is the ability to perform. Being able to perform means feeling confident enough to share what you know or can do with a group or a single person, on or off stage. When children have learned to perform on a musical instrument, they develop considerable poise and ability to control their emotions. This ability to present oneself to an audience is very valuable and makes many everyday occurrences more natural for a child. Children get over being self-conscious, shy and uneasy with new people and situations when they have built self-confidence through performing.

I tell my students that playing for others will help them to be brave and strong. I tell them that there will be less that will scare them if they perform a lot. Finally, after years of performing, there will be little they will fear. Performing builds courage, self confidence and self control.

When I asked my 17-year-old Suzuki student Jodie Lee, about the greatest benefit she had received from her Suzuki experience, she said, "The ability to perform and present in front of

people." She added, "I also think my academic success had been largely due to my Suzuki study." This is quite a compliment for the Suzuki Method since she will be graduating in the top five students in a school of several hundred and has just received word she scored extremely high on her PSATs. When I asked Jodie's mother whether she saw the Suzuki approach simply as a way to learn to play a musical instrument or if it was equally important in other ways, she replied, "Most important in other ways. They (my children) learned self-discipline, concentration, memorization, poise and performing under pressure which can be applied to all aspects of their lives."

THE ABILITY TO BE DISCIPLINED

Discipline is a key ingredient of any successful endeavor, and the Suzuki Method can serve as a vehicle through which a child can learn to be disciplined. Nothing helps a child develop the ability to do something on a regular basis like doing something on a regular basis. This is called practice, and it is an exercise that, over a period of time, develops discipline. When a child develops discipline in one area such as daily practicing, it is only a matter of time before parents see evidence that the child has become disciplined in other areas of life.

Suzuki says, "Creating desire in the child is the parents' duty."² I think that discipline in a task or activity is an outgrowth of several steps that start with a parent who creates the desire to want to learn and participate in that activity. I think of discipline as a chain of events that progresses like this in Suzuki training:

- Parents create a desire to learn, and the child wants to practice and learn.
- When the child wants to practice, he will practice more, thus developing the habit of practicing.
- When habits are developed that lead to repeated actions, skill is developed.
- When skill is developed, the activity becomes easy and effortless.
- When the activity becomes effortless, the child will enjoy the activity and feel pleasure in doing it.
- When the child finds pleasure and satisfaction in doing an activity, he will begin to value the ability to do the activity.
- When the child begins to value the ability to do the activity, he will consciously or unconsciously assume some responsibility and feel a certain obligation about the activity.
- When a child can acknowledge that he feels responsibility and obligation and those words are connected to action in a given activity, we say he has become disciplined in that activity.

Most people are not disciplined in a total sense: rather we learn to be disciplined in one activity after the other starting with those things we enjoy most. Parents hold the key to a child's discipline. It is the parents who have the greatest potential to influence the heart and mind of their children and can put this chain of events in motion.

THE ABILITY TO PERSEVERE

Because children really like to conquer difficult situations and want to please their parents, parents can be a powerful force in helping their child develop perseverance. If we can help them through the discouraging and frustrating times with good humor and affection, we can help them learn to forge ahead and try again. What a great ability to have as you go through life!

As my student Lauren said when I asked her about perseverance, "I think my perseverance comes from being a Suzuki piano student, and it has been a major influence in my life. I can think of four cases where I have used the perseverance I learned from the Suzuki Method outside of Suzuki situations:

1. We have four levels for Math with four being the highest. I was placed in the second math and was determined to get into the level three math. I worked hard enough to show the teacher I could handle it, and was advanced to the third level.
2. I wanted to make a travel soccer team recently, so I gave it my all at practices and games and I finally made it. Lots of other students didn't make it because they just didn't persevere.
3. I chose a very hard arrangement of a popular piece I like this spring and because I was bound and determined to play it well, I succeeded.
4. If I get a low grade on a test, I try to figure out what went wrong and how I can improve my study habits. I don't just give up and accept that I can't do better."

The best comment I heard from a parent about perseverance came at a seminar I gave. A mother stood up and said that she had received a great compliment from the soccer coach about her son who had played Suzuki violin for nine years. The coach told her, "If I had to be stranded on a desert island and could only pick one person to be with me, I'd take your son Steven. He never gives up. I know he could find us a way off that island!" The mother went on to say, "I believe that Steven learned about perseverance from studying Suzuki violin and has transferred that ability to other activities he is involved in."

Suzuki says, "Teaching intonation and technique will never be more than a method. We do not have to become professional musicians. It is enough to grow up playing the violin. Because as a person works at playing the violin well he develops ability to overcome any difficult problems by working, then he accomplishes the ability to overcome even the hardest problems in life easily."³

ABILITIES OF THE HEART

There is one last area of ability development that Suzuki writes a lot about--the development of abilities of the heart. These talents or abilities are much less concrete, more ambiguous and probably less understood, but I find them no less a valuable reason for studying the Suzuki Method. Suzuki says that, "Music (instruction) exists for the purpose of growing an admirable heart." He says, "A child raised on Bach from a young age will develop the noble soul, powerful personality and religious sensitivity of Bach. The force that makes a child want to live and survive (the life force) will absorb the traits of Bach's music to a high degree."⁴

I think Suzuki is saying that by listening to music your child can become sensitized to feelings and emotions inherent in music. Just as a young child grows sensitive to the dialect and accents of his family and region of the country, so does every child gradually master musical sensitivity through repeated exposure to great music.

Thus, couldn't we say that the Suzuki experience, which places such great emphasis on listening to great music, has the potential to develop children who are able to hear and feel in music expressions of love, compassion, empathy, joy, sadness, happiness, exhilaration. And aren't these what one might call the abilities of the heart?

Suzuki says, "If a parent can raise a child to have ability and be an admirable person, that is enough. Later the child himself will be able to make his own way. If a child is brought up to have a beautiful heart and good abilities such as being able to love other and to receive love, then the mission of the parent is ended. The way will open for the child later. Parents do not need to worry whether or not their children will succeed."5

Teachers should remind parents that the Suzuki approach to learning is about developing abilities, all kind of important abilities a child will use throughout his life. And while it is true that Suzuki parents and students generally come to us to learn to play a musical instrument, I believe that parents will actually be more effective in the work they do with their children if they realize that the Suzuki experience is about developing the whole child.

References

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