

For parents: the dos and don'ts of private music lessons

by [Sara Marie Brenner](#) September 01, 2014

http://www.saramariebrenner.com/for_parents_dos_donts_private_music_lessons

I first saw a list of dos and don'ts for parents in Dr. Martha Baker-Jordan's book, [Practical Piano Pedagogy](#). Over the years, my opinion of what parents should or should not do has changed somewhat as I see what works and what fails with individual students and situations at home. Dr. Jordan's original list served as the beginning of the framework for mine, which has now been changed and redone several times over the years.

I encourage the parents of my students to follow this list of dos and don'ts, and I suggest that every teacher should have a similar list. At the very least, this puts everyone on the same page. When used effectively, this can be a weekly reminder for everyone involved to keep lessons going down the right path.

Another "don't" -- don't expect perfection! Each person is different, and sometimes we'll have hiccups down the road in our journey together in the [teacher, student and parent relationship](#). This list just gives us a very helpful place to start.

Whether you're a teacher or a parent, I would certainly enjoy hearing what you think about these dos and don'ts!

DOs & DON'Ts FOR PARENTS

DOs

- When lessons first begin, make it clear that **music lessons are a long-term process**. Avoid saying, "we're going to try it" or "we'll see how it goes after a month" or "I'm not sure how long she'll stick with it." Music is a language. Parents don't give up on a child when she has difficulty speaking and ask if she wants to quit talking! Music lessons will have their difficulties, but with great communication among the teacher, parent and student, everyone will work through those together.
- Every child learns at a different pace, so please **refrain from comparing your child to another**. All music students have something special to give; going through a book more quickly than another is meaningless in the long term. Remember, every child can!
- Take some time to **contemplate how you can best help your child**. When do you dive in supportively? When do you encourage? When do you withdraw and give your child space? Be sensitive to this. Whether you have any knowledge about music is not the point here -- there is much you can do if you are not a musician.
- **Stress and reward the quality**, not quantity, of practice time. For more information on deep practice and how it impacts learning, read the book [The Talent Code](#). It isn't about how long you practice, or forcing a child to sit at her piano until she gets it right.
- "Music comes to the child more naturally when there is music in his mother's speaking voice," said Shinichi Suzuki. So **be pleasant and encouraging about your child's practicing**. Naturally, there will be occasions when you will need to be firm. But remember with "music in your voice," coach her, guide her, but don't police her. Having the attitude that the child *gets* to practice rather than *having* to practice can make a huge difference. It is an honor to get to practice! It is not a chore to add to the chore chart next to other dreaded responsibilities.
- **When you help your child, be at her side** -- not at the other end of the room or in the next room. Teach her to treat the practice session with the same respect she gives to her lesson. And, when you're next to her, the help you give will come across as true, supportive help, rather than what could be perceived as your screaming at her from two rooms away.

- During a crisis, **always talk it out with your child** in an atmosphere of mutual respect. If the issue is serious, you may need to discuss it with the teacher first. Allow your child to participate in the final decision so she feels that his voice has been heard. Teach her to interact constructively in group decision making. But also, keep in mind lovingly that she is the child, you are the parent and the teacher is an equal participant.
- **A sense of humor is a powerful tool** with which to resolve disagreements about practicing. Be patient, and try the ideas in the book [*To Learn With Love*](#) by Constance Starr.
- Always **let your child feel you are proud of her achievements**, even when they are small. Music lessons can be difficult at times, so celebrate every achievement! Then, and only then, get to work on the other things needing focus.
- **Help your child to be able to listen to the Suzuki CD every day, and help your child to play the piano or sing every day that she eats!**

DON'Ts

- **Never belittle** your child's efforts.
- **Avoid making excuses in front of your teacher** for not practicing, especially with young children. Since adults run the schedule of young children who cannot practice on their own, it is up to the parent to set aside that time. Privately discuss any practicing issues so that the teacher may help with them.
- **Don't despair at temporary lapses in practice.** Your child will make progress in the lesson itself, although less rapidly. There may be what the teacher calls "practicing lessons" if your child has not practiced. You can read more at SaraMarieBrenner.com about the teacher's perspective on practicing, and her patience when there is a lack of practice.
- **Don't threaten to stop her lessons** if she doesn't practice. Threats can work during periods of high motivation in music but may do the opposite during a "growing pain" period. The day may come when she will remind you of your threat and insist that you make good on it. In addition, we want to focus on positive reinforcement since the negative rarely works correctly.
- **Don't criticize your child in the presence of others**, especially the teacher. The teacher focuses on building up a good relationship with your child, and your child's loss of face with the teacher will tend to undermine this. Definitely speak with the teacher any time there is a problem. Sometimes you can even use your lesson to chat with your teacher, without the student.
- **Refrain from correcting or teaching your child during the lesson.** During the lesson, the teacher is working on the relationship with the child and knows what is coming next. Something may not be mentioned that needs to be fixed because there is something else coming up in that lesson. And, if the teacher disagrees with what you're doing, you're putting the teacher in a place of either letting it go and having something incorrect taught to the child, or correcting you in front of the child. Both can be very difficult situations, so please help the teacher not be in that spot by simply refraining from teaching your child during the music lesson.
- Your financial investment in your child's music lessons pays its dividends through the skills he acquires over the years, not by the amount of his daily practice, nor in how much he plays for you or your guests. Remember you are giving your child a music education for his artistic use, for his self-expression, and for his pleasure. **Don't expect a child to be grateful for your sacrifices.** Her gratitude will come years later when she can play and enjoy music as an adult.