

The MUSIC BOX

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How to get the Most out of Music Lessons

Be sure this is what you want to do. Is this the instrument you want to play and practice on every day? Yes, it may be difficult, but if you love it, you will want to stick with it.

Be on time and prepared. Have all your books with you even though you may not use them all every week. Always have a manuscript book for writing exercises and music.

Practice is essential. Learning an instrument or learning to sing is more than just listening to a teacher once a week. It takes a lot of reinforcement and repetition to read music and to develop the muscles necessary to play your instrument or sing properly. Although 20-40 minutes every day is ideal, everyone has a different style of practicing. Some people can play for hours one day, totally losing track of time, and not go back for 3 days. Others can't walk by their instrument without playing for a few minutes; playing in 5-minute increments 6 or 7 times a day!

One teacher advocates never putting the instrument in the case at home, but leaving it on a table with a cloth covering. That way, it is always accessible to play. (Not recommend with small children in the house!) Pianos and other immovable instruments should not be placed in a room with a television set for a few reasons. The noise from the TV is extremely distracting to musicians and people watching won't be able to hear. It will eventually create negative comments, thereby fostering a set practice schedule (when no one is watching TV) thus taking away the spontaneity of the musician. On the other hand, some need to have a regiment. Practicing should be part of your routine; you do homework, brush teeth, shower, chores, etc.; practicing is just one of the things you do everyday. Put off television, computer games, etc. until you are done with all your requirements.

Music is great fun, but practicing is a lonely job. The reward usually doesn't come until the next lesson or until you play/sing with others. It's like exercising, but you don't get as sweaty. You don't always look forward to doing it, but once you start, it feels good, and afterward you feel great!

Parents of young students should be involved with the instruction and practicing.

The younger the child, the more involved the parent should be. Dr. Suzuki of the Suzuki Method insists that the parents learn the instrument along with the child, thereby creating a model and a bond at the same time. This also makes music part of the family routine and values, and children learn most by watching their parents.

Self-motivation is rare in children. Positive reinforcements, like setting up concerts where the child can ‘sell’ tickets to family members, sticker charts for days practiced, or earning ‘points’ toward a reward or outing are great incentives. Students may express interest in getting a better quality instrument or switch to an electric guitar, (or electric brass or violin) for example. Unless the upgrade is necessary, it should be based on the achievement of the student, and can be part of a reward system.

Anatomy of a music lesson

Most teachers follow a lesson book, and all teachers at the **Music Box** teach note reading, unless there are special circumstances. Even our Suzuki teachers strive for note reading when the student is able. A typical lesson will involve some type of warm-up exercises, sight-reading or scales during the course of the lesson. The teacher will hear what the student has been working on, making suggestions for improvement, ‘drilling’ problem areas, and adding dynamics, for the hopeful goal of making the piece ‘musical’. Then the next lesson/song will be introduced. When the songs get longer and more complex or if the student enjoys Ear-training, Theory, or writing music, it is probably time for a longer lesson. Thirty minutes usually covers going over the previous lesson and starting the new material. Forty-five to sixty minutes is ideal for older and/or more motivated students and for students combining lessons, such as piano and voice.

Cost effectiveness

When the week’s lesson goes unpracticed, the student cannot easily progress to the next lesson. Lesson books are designed to be progressive in skills, so it doesn’t make sense to continue on if the previous skill has not been mastered. We all learned the alphabet before we learned to read; many primary school teachers made certain of that. If you don’t practice, you’ll end up repeating what you did the week before, and that’s got to be boring. Not only that, but its like paying for the same lesson twice! You may then be tempted to skip the next lesson thinking you’ll have more time to practice in the coming week, only to finally open the book and discover you haven’t any idea how the song goes, or what skills the lesson was developing.

Honesty is the best policy

If/when this happens, tell your teacher you haven’t practiced. Knowing this, s/he may quickly review and try to move on at the same time. If you tell him/her you practiced when you didn’t, you run the risk of your teacher thinking you just don’t get it, and s/he will instinctively slow down the lesson pace and throw in a lot more reviewing and drilling of the basics.

Missed Lessons

When you cannot attend a scheduled lesson, ask if it is possible to have a make-up lesson in the same week. The earlier in the week you call, the better chance of getting a make-up. Try to cancel a lesson only for sickness or emergencies. Having a lot of homework or the cat being sick may seem like a good reason to cancel, but often you or the teacher may be sick the following week, and now there are three weeks between lessons. This will lead to a whole lot more backtracking and reviewing. Missing more than one lesson out of six is considered excessive, for whatever the reason. You will not be making the progress you should, and it will become frustrating to you and the teacher.

What you are learning by playing an instrument is very different from any other skill. Yes, it is accuracy and precision, but it is accuracy and precision in exact timing. In order to play/sing with others, you need to keep going. A painter uses colors and shapes, but can take a break whenever s/he wants. No other skill involves getting it right without skipping a beat. A surgeon has no one timing him/her to a metronome marking! Music is probably the hardest skill you will ever learn, but definitely one of the most rewarding.