

PRACTICE: THE BASICS

Kaila Graef

Does practice really make perfect? In a word, no. Practice does not make perfect. More accurately, practice makes for consistency. Unfortunately, improper practice leads only to poor results and frustration. What, then, is the purpose of practice? To gain ease; not to gain perfection. In lessons, students are learning new skills. Practice is what makes those skills become easy. Once a week a student sees me for a private lesson, which lasts between half an hour and an hour. The other 167 hours of the week, students are on their own! Therefore, it is critical that students learn how to practice effectively at home. The following suggestions are directed towards parents practicing with their children; however, the information is valid for students of any age.

Location

Try to provide a practice space that is free of distractions and interruptions.

Schedule

Consult with your child to come up with a daily practice schedule. For beginners, you should set aside 25 to 30 minutes each day. The time can be broken up into many pieces or done all at once; whichever works best for your child. Once the schedule has been set, you and your child must commit to it. This way, practice will become part of your daily routine and not something to argue about. Regardless, there will be days when the last thing your child wants to do is practice. In such a case, I would recommend saying something to the effect of, "We're going to have a very short practice session today, but we need to be focused, and we need to start now." Even seven minutes of focused practice is better than nothing.

In his book *Helping Parents Practice*, Edmund Sprunger recommends giving your child healthy, genuine choices about practice. For example, if you ask your child, "Do you want to practice now?" and she says "NO!" you must be prepared to live with the answer, since you offered that choice. Instead, you may try asking, "When would you like to practice today? Now, or in ten minutes?"

Research shows that we best retain a new skill if repetition—that is, practice—occurs within 24 hours or less. If we wait 48 hours (skip a day of practice), retention drops drastically, and by 72 hours, retention is almost zero. That is not to say you can never afford to take a day off. Taking a day off once every week or two is perfectly acceptable as long as you have a well-established routine in general. However, I would not

recommend taking off the day before or after a lesson. In addition, one of the best possible ways to retain material learned in a lesson is to review it immediately after you get home.

Listening

Before you begin to practice, you must have a clear concept of what the end product should be. This is why listening to the Suzuki CD every day is so helpful. Without having a clear image (i.e. the proper bow hold) or sound in mind before you pick up the violin, it is very difficult to effectively direct your practice.

Focus

Focus is the most critical ingredient for a successful practice session. No matter how long you practice, if you are not focused, very little will be accomplished. If you sense that your child is playing without paying attention to what he is doing, ask him questions to bring him back to the task at hand. For example, "What did you think of your bow hold that time?" or "What did you like about that play-through? What could have gone better?" Remind your child to sing in his mind as he plays. That way, he can put his mind in charge of his fingers, rather than the reverse.

Practice with Purpose

During each practice session, set realistic, short-range goals to be accomplished in the given amount of time. The smaller and more specific the goal, the better. For example, telling your child, "Fix Lightly Row," is too large and unspecific a goal and will lead to frustration. Instead, identify the one thing to work on that will make the most impact. "Play through Lightly Row while keeping your bow in the sounding point," is much more specific.

If the goal appears to be unattainable in the amount of time you have, simplify the goal. A child should experience success during every practice session. Therefore, if it seems that the previously mentioned goal is too large, modify it. "Play the *first line* of Lightly Row while keeping your bow in the sounding point" may be a more realistic goal for today.

Mindful Repetition

Let's say you and your child have been practicing "Mississippi Hot Dog Twinkle" with the goal of moving the bow in a straight line. Finally, she gets it! Now what? Congratulate her, but do not stop now and move on to something else. This is the time to begin repetition work. If you move on when your child has just achieved something, what she has really learned is the incorrect version, because that is the version she repeated over and over until she played it correctly. Our muscles remember the action

that is repeated the most, regardless of whether or not it is correct.

It takes about a week of daily repetition for an action to remain in our long-term memory. So, after repeating the correct action ten times today, move on to something new. Tomorrow, it will take less time to produce the first correct action than it did today. Again, repeat it ten times. By the eighth day, the correct action will have become a habit. In an article on practicing, the renowned Suzuki violin teacher Ronda Cole wrote, “Don’t practice until you get it right; practice until you cannot get it wrong!”

It is important to note that while we do repetitions to develop muscle memory, the mind must remain engaged. In between each repetition, it is crucial that we imagine in our minds the next repetition—the correct sound, feeling, and action—before doing it. We have to remain fully aware during each repetition and interested in what we are doing. If not, this type of practice becomes dull and ineffective, and we quickly lose sight of our larger goal: to create music.

Accuracy Before Speed

Slow practice yields the fastest results. Have your child choose a tempo that allows him to play correctly, maintain control, and maintain a feeling of physical ease. If he aims for control rather than speed, the speed will develop naturally. However, if your child plays fast before he is ready, he will be teaching himself to play sloppily.

Work from Small to Large

If your child is struggling with a particular section of a piece, isolate the problem area (perhaps a line of music, perhaps a small group of notes). Master that fragment, then put it back into the context of the piece.

Mental Practice

Mental practice is a powerful practice tool. Let’s say your child, in the attempt to correct something, plays a passage over and over without any improvement. It is time to stop for a moment. By continuing, your child is bound to become frustrated, and repeating the passage at this point will actually make it worse instead of better. Instead, analyze the task with your child. What is she trying to accomplish? What is the cause of the problem? Then ask your child to go over the passage in her mind, without touching the violin and without moving a muscle. Once she can imagine herself playing the passage correctly, go back to playing it with the violin. Chances are, it will have improved. This is because your child is now directing her actions with her mind, rather than letting her muscles repeat the mistake they are used to making out of habit. 🐞