



Getting Your Kids to Practice

If you have experienced the daily battle of trying to get a child to practice an instrument, you know it can mount to a conflict resembling World War III. If just thinking about a practice session gets your heart racing and your head aching, here are a few helpful ideas to make it all bearable...and even fun.

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Studio 5 Contributor, Kiersten Blanchard shares some ideas that will help. <http://studio5.ksl.com/index.php?nid=54&sid=2668011>

Practice with your child (until the results are the same with or without you, around age 14).

- Get an assigned number of repetitions for each practice spot in a piece from your teacher; students are typically more willing to do things for their teacher.
- Know when to suspend a practice session and walk away. Never argue with your child; it simply brings you down to the same level as the child. Walk away and try again later.
- Give your child choices...not about whether to practice, the time, or place...but anything else that might help them feel like they have some control of their practice.
- Offer specific, genuine praise.
- Create a story that goes along with each song.

Practice at the same time every day.

- Mornings are typically when everybody feels fresh and focused.
- If your child doesn't do well in the morning, give them a snack and a few minutes to relax and practice right after school.
- Give your child a 5 minute warning before the practice session.
- Practice left until just before bed is a battle waiting to happen.

Create a successful practice environment.

- Practice in the same place every day.
- Remove visual and noise distractions, such as pets, siblings, television. If you choose not to answer the phone during a practice session, you are sending the message to your child that the session is important to you.
- Make sure the room is well lit.
- Keep the temperature around 70 degrees. A place that is too warm or stuffy will make you both sleepy and slow. A place that is too cold will cause fingers to hurt.
- Make sure the room smells nice. Studies have shown that an aromatic stimulus will enhance attentions levels, memory and cognitive learning. Pleasant smells such as cinnamon, cloves, or lemon help make practice a positive experience.

Set goals and break into bite-size pieces.

- Have a practice chart, so they can check off assignments and feel the accomplishment of getting things done.
- Tie the length of practice to a goal rather than a clock.
- Hold several small concerts each week...for a parent, neighbor, friends, or some favorite stuffed animals.

Make practice more fun and reward hard work. When possible, the music should be the reward, but this will likely not be enough to keep a young child motivated. You know your child best. Think of what delights him/her and introduce in it some way into a practice session.

- Video record a practice session and let them watch it.
- Hold an impromptu performance. Make up some programs and have each person take notes of a few things they liked.
- Have a puzzle where the child can place on piece of the puzzle after the completion of each assignment.
- Throw a basketball in a hoop after the completion of each assignment. Have a goal for how many baskets can be made by the end of the session.
- Play Simon Says.
- Roll a die for the number of repetitions. A 1 means roll again, and a 6 means the parent can choose any number from 2-5.
- Divide a piece into 5 sections. Roll a die to see which section to practice. (Do this several times.) A 6 means the whole piece should be performed.
- Create a grab bag with the names of pieces, or parts of pieces, and other assignments. Include a few fun surprises.
- Have your child guess the next song to practice by clapping the rhythm or playing/singing the first note.
- Use an abacus to count repetitions.
- Light several votive candles. (This creates a fun environment.) Allow your child to blow one out after each completed assignment.
- Set up a board game and take a turn after each completed assignment.
- Write daily assignments on sticky notes. Let child stick on wall in desired order, then take them down (or stick on you) when completed.
- Buy a practice candle. Light the candle and keep it burning while your child is practicing. Blow it out at the end of each session. When the candle is burned down to the bottom, the child earns a pre-determined prize.

- Using a paper and some markers/pencil, draw a part of a picture each time an assignment is completed. Let them guess what it is each time you draw a part. Once they guess it, you start a new picture.
- Same as above, but you play hangman and guess letters to complete a word or phrase.
- Use puppets to check posture or make suggestions.
- Let your child earn tickets to a musical performance.
- Use M&Ms or pom-poms to fill a happy jar. They earn one M&M for each assignment they complete without complaining. They can eat the M&Ms at the end of the session or keep filling the jar until it is full for several lessons to earn a predetermined prize.
- Write your child's practice assignments on several small pieces of paper. Wrap the pieces of paper around pennies/nickels. The child unwraps the paper, completes the assignment and keeps the coin.

Suggested reading:

How to Get Your Child to Practice...Without Resorting to Violence!! By Cynthia Richards

Not Until You've Done Your Practice! by Philip Johnston & David Sutton; The classic survival guide for kids who are learning a musical instrument, but hate practicing; humorous, Australian author

Practicing for Young Musicians: You Are Your Own Teacher by Harvey R. Snitkin. Ph.D.