

# How To Get Your Child To Practice...Without Resorting To Violence!!

written by  
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(selected excerpts)

## An Age-Old Problem

"When I was your age I would have given anything to be able to take music lessons."

"Willy, you get in there and get your practicing done before I paddle you!"

"If you don't practice, we'll have to stop lessons."

"Just wait until you grow up. You'll be sorry that you didn't practice."

"I wish my mother had made me practice when I was young!"

These statements, which have rent the air in uncounted millions of homes, portray a dilemma, which besets parents who offer their children music lessons. With very few exceptions, the practicing problem is one that parents sooner or later must deal with. I have often been asked by other parents "How do you get your children to practice?" As I explain some of my feelings on the topic, I find that many parents perceive only two alternatives: Either grit your teeth and coerce the child to the bitter end or give up and spare everyone the daily battle. Some parents give up because they believe it is not fair to force their own wishes on the child, all the while knowing that the child has talent, which ought to be developed. Others give up when the child's interest wanes, and they accept it as a sign of lack of talent, which justifies quitting lessons. Some parents are simply at their wits end to find a way to motivate the child and are tired of all the nagging. None of these alternatives need be the case. Though there is hard work involved, practicing can be a positive activity, which will launch your child into the discovery of music and actually draw you closer together.

## Motivation and Music

People are motivated only if they choose to be. All that parents and teachers can do is create an environment which sparks an interest in music and an inner desire to learn. What motivates one person may not motivate another. A child who is involved in the study of music draws motivation from various sources. Some types of motivation have stronger influence at different periods of maturity. As an individual gains experience in something, the reasons he or she has for doing it may change.

Beginning with the lowest maturity levels and working upward toward self-propulsion, an individual may find all kinds of reasons to practice:

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	There are varying levels of motivation:
"I practice because my Mom pays me 50 cents every day that I do." "I practice because I can't play until I do."	Rewards and Consequences
"I practice because my folks say I have to." "I practice because I get a lot of attention when I do well." "I practice because I've got a great teacher and I don't want to disappoint her."	Human Relationships
"I practice so I can be competent at something." "I practice because it's fun to play in a group and I want to be as good as (or better than) the others."	Feelings of Self-worth
"I practice because I love the music and the reward of doing it well."	Joy inherent in the activity

Adults operate on different levels of motivation simultaneously, depending on the activity. Children usually don't have the capacity to operate on high levels of motivation until they get experience. Developing a skill, especially in music, is like the growth of a beautiful flower. A seed is planted in the earth where, if the proper conditions are achieved and maintained, it will swell, break its outer shell and begin to sprout. This first stage of growth seems interminably long, and from the surface seem not to be taking place at all. Yet watering and watchful care against predators must continue. The seed must receive continuous nourishment or else it will die. As it first begins to grow, the seed is not able to find its own food but draws upon food stored for it by its parent. It is difficult to be patient during this early stage of growth.

When a child begins music study, certain conditions must be met, just as with the seed. Encouragement, a good teacher, daily practice, good practice environment and habits are some

of these conditions. It may not appear, judging from some of the less than musical sounds coming from the youngster's efforts, that anything in the way of real progress is taking place. A child who was excited about beginning music lessons may lack the patience and commitment to give the routine attention needed. After all, it's a lot of work to keep the seed nourished, and not very rewarding when you don't see anything growing. It usually takes an adult with experience and long-range perception to help the child continue on.

After a time, the seed sprouts, sending a shoot upward into the air and sunshine where the stalk and leaves will grow, and a shoot downward where the root system will develop to anchor and nourish the plant. This is a satisfying stage because growth, though gradual, can at least be seen. The plant is still young and immature, but as it grows, there is greater motivation to give it care. the upward reaching plant is the actual music-making of the child. The sounds are beginning to be refined and the child is able to play pieces for family and friends. A sense of growing competence and the good opinions of others count heavily among the rewards. The roots of the child's ability, such as the technical achievements in motor control, physical strength, note reading ability, etc., are the underlying sources of nourishment whereby the music making gains its quality. A sturdy root, or a thorough background in the rudiments of playing which are transferable from piece to piece, is necessary if the whole plant is to be strong and beautiful. It's easy for a child to neglect attention to the roots in favor of the growing stalk because the roots aren't as readily seen or heard. In other words, the child may favor playing pieces rather than learning other, perhaps more technical, aspects of playing. The student is gaining proficiency but may yet lack the maturity to give the growing plant all the right kind of attention. He or she hasn't yet experienced the full beauty of the flower and needs the careful guidance of an adult.

Finally the growing plant reaches a stage of maturity when it begins to form a bud and then the flower in full bloom. This is the stage when a young musician has gained enough proficiency and maturity to really get "hooked" on music. This is when the student is motivated to practice because of the satisfaction of mastering the instrument and of playing the music itself. The music, after all, is the ultimate motivation. The young student has experienced the beauty of musical expression and wants more. At this point, students have a need to express themselves musically because the music has become a part of them.

There seems to be a turning point in motivation for most music students who pursue their study to advanced levels. When this happens varies according to a multitude of individual circumstances, the basic ones being how quickly proficiency is acquired and how early the student matures. Some students have the proficiency but not the maturity to be self motivated. Others have the maturity but not the proficiency to experience this turning point. I have observed that most successful musicians have discovered the magic of music enough to be willing to practice somewhere between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Some gifted and early maturing individuals may experience this sooner.

One of my colleagues describes what seems to be a typical pattern: □

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- Age 7 - 14 "I practiced more because I was expected to - - I had to!"
- Age 14 - 18 "I was performing a lot and realized I needed to practice."
- Age 18 - 23 (College) "I finally came to enjoy it!"

With music, unlike academic or scientific fields of endeavor, it is too late to wait until a child matures to start practicing. It must be begun in the early years of childhood when the motivators must come from outside sources.

There is much work involved in getting a child to the blossoming stage of musical development. There are many pitfalls and interference's that must be countered. This book explores sources of motivation for a young music student and helps parents provide the right growing conditions for the flower to come to full bloom. □