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HOW TO FIND A GREAT MUSIC TEACHER FOR YOUR CHILD

There are gems out there. Here's how to find them.

by Susan Pascale, founder and director of the South Pasadena Strings Program

The world is full of terrific music teachers, but unfortunately, there are also bad ones.

I met my worst music teacher in New York City, at 19, when I was studying violin at a conservatory. The school sent me to an internationally-famous violinist who taught out of his posh Greenwich Village apartment. I was thrilled.

As it turned out, this teacher had a unique way of communicating: When I played something wrong, his foot would lash out in a reflexive kick - landing on my rear end (luckily, he wore house slippers). After a few lessons, I was out of there.

A year later, I found of the best teachers I've ever had. This man was not famous, rich, or even a world-class violinist. He was a rumpled new immigrant, living in a tiny walkup apartment in Queens.

He turned out to be a fantastic, creative and inspirational teacher. At 20, my playing blossomed almost overnight. Thanks to him, I passed my very first audition for a professional symphony orchestra.

Many adults have anecdotes like this. Sometimes, the worst teachers make the funniest stories. What isn't so humorous is that they can drive talented youngsters away from music, sometimes forever. We do not want this to happen to our own children.

Now I am a director of a music school, as well as parent of musically-accomplished children. I know that anyone can hang a shingle declaring themselves a music teacher. But to find the gems, you have to proceed carefully and do your homework.

BEGINNINGS ARE IMPORTANT

Start with research.

1. **ASK EVERYONE YOU KNOW.** Aim for at least three recommendations, just as if you were choosing an orthodontist. While collecting names, also ask what they charge.
2. **LOOK ON THE WEB:** When you reach the website of a music teacher or school web, look for student performance videos. Watch them for high standards. If you know nothing about music, email the link to musical friends and ask *them* whether the students have a good teacher.
3. **ATTEND A RECITAL:** If all the students play badly, head for the hills! A few struggling beginners in a recital is absolutely normal and appropriate; but there should also be beautiful players.

If the teacher does not have student recitals, that's a red flag. The teacher may be hiding something (or even worse, lazy).

INTERVIEW THE CANDIDATES

Have an in-depth conversation, with your child present. You should all be interviewing each other.

The important questions

- **'WHAT'S YOUR AVAILABILITY?** You want a sense of the teachers' schedule. Teachers who are frequently out of town may not be the best choice. It never fails: Cancelled lessons = less practice. Too many breaks will hinder progress.
- **'ARE YOU A PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN?'** It would concern me if the teacher isn't in the music world, but just picking up a little extra money.
- **'DO YOUR STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN OUTSIDE MUSICAL ACTIVITIES?'** A good teacher exposes students to the wider world of music, and is not afraid to send them to outside venues: ensembles, camps, workshops, etc. It's even better if their students play in top-quality youth orchestras, and win competitions.
- **'WHAT LEVELS DO YOU TEACH?'** You want a good fit. If your child is just starting out, look for a teacher with an organized beginning method, and a proven

track record. Other teachers may take only advanced students, for pre-professional training.

"Many levels" can also be a good answer. I chose my daughter's violin teacher after attending his student recital. He headed the strings department at an excellent school, and I was impressed that he taught a wide range of students, from advanced beginners through highly accomplished.

- 'DO YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC APPROACH TO TEACHING?' It's good if they can articulate their methods and ideas. If they can't, however, that's not necessarily a reason to cross them off. Musicians tend to be right-brained and 'out of the box'. Some can't explain, but can 'do'.
- 'WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF STUDENTS?' Look for long- and short-term expectations. Long-term goals might be "Participate in recitals every three months." Short-term goals relate to daily practice.
- 'DO YOU PUT ASSIGNMENTS IN WRITING?' A teacher who supports goals in writing - with practice charts, notebooks, and entries at every lesson - is a good teacher.
- 'WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF PARENTS?' One teacher asked me to be the stenographer during my daughter's lessons, so she could focus on teaching. Consider whether you are willing to do what is asked.
- 'WHAT IS YOUR FEE?' From talking to other parents, you should have an idea of the going rates in your area. But don't judge a teacher by the price. Subsidized programs (through schools or cities) will be less expensive, while in-demand teachers charge more. If you find a great teacher with fees beyond your budget, ask whether they have an assistant or protégé who charges less. You'll still have access to the main teacher.

A less important question:

- 'HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TEACHING?' Some of the best teachers I've worked with are young. A year of teaching experience is not a reason to rule them out. It's safer to take a gamble on a less-experienced teacher if they're part of a larger music school, with a strong director.

Questions the teacher should ask you

An interested and responsive teacher will ask questions like, 'Does your child express an interest in music?' 'Does he have the ability to focus for 20 minutes?' 'How does she do in school?' 'Do the parents or grandparents have a musical background?' 'Is there a piano (or other instrument) in your home?' 'Do you (the parents) have time and energy to help children practice daily?'

The teacher should ask to hear your child play, if the student is not a beginner.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Now think about all the factors we've discussed. To recap, ask yourself if the teacher offers:

- High-quality teaching?
- Recitals?
- Networking with outside musical organizations?
- Rapport with your child *and* you?
- Inspiration?

Plus, consider:

- The availability of the teacher
- The cost
- The location

For my own children, quality training, and an inspiring teacher are the two most important factors, and I'm willing to go the distance for them.

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Susan Pascale is founder and director of the nationally-acclaimed South Pasadena Strings Program, which teaches piano, violin, viola, cello, bass, guitar, and voice to preschoolers through adults in the Los Angeles area. Her children's orchestras have been featured in many local and national publications, as well as MSNBC, KABC, KNBC, KTLA. She was honored on the nationally-syndicated Larry Elder show as a 'hero' for her work in youth music education. In 2005, her youth orchestra was invited to play at Carnegie Hall. She is also the creator of the KinderPiano® and KinderStrings® music education programs.. Pascale teaches seminars, workshops to music educators and parents as well as students. For more information, and to see her students in action, go to www.stringsprogram.com.