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Is Your Child Ready for Music Lessons?

There are good reasons to teach musical instruments to preschoolers, but there are also pitfalls. Here's how you can ensure that your child's introduction to music is fun - and keep 'em coming back for more.

by Susan Pascale, founder and director of the Los Angeles-based South Pasadena Strings Program

I began music lessons relatively late in life – at the ripe old age of 9, when I was in 4th grade – because that's when my elementary school offered them. I chose the violin, and loved it. My parents and teachers recognized my ability, and supported my decision to become a professional violinist. But when I reached conservatory, what a shock! Most of the other students had begun years younger, in kindergarten or earlier. Playing their instruments seemed as natural to them as speaking, and I envied their fluency. I had to practice 5 to 7 hours a day to catch up to those 'virtuosos.'

Today, a growing body of research confirms what I sensed. There are neurological benefits to musical training from an early age, when the growing brain at its most flexible. It's also not surprising that research associates early music lessons with higher grades and test scores, as well as self-esteem. And starting young means children have a better shot at becoming accomplished musician, if that's where their interests take them.

But not TOO young! Along with being a musician, I am a mother of three children, (including two teenagers who are outstanding pre-professional musicians, and a 6-year-old budding cellist); and director of a school that has taught music to hundreds of youngsters of all ages. Here's what I have learned about how to launch young children happily and successfully into the world of music.

1. ENRICH THE BABIES. I have met very few children under three who are ready for instrument lessons. For most tots and parents, it's an exercise in frustration. There are better ways. Bring them to hear live music. Keep simple toy instruments, like keyboards, around the house - kids love pressing buttons. If you ever played an instrument, dust it off

and start playing again, in front of them. But don't invest in lessons (unless the lessons are for you!)

2. **WAIT FOR THE MAGIC AGE.** Some people believe that the magic age for music lessons to begin is 5, or even 7. In my experience, if there is a magic age, it's 3 ½. For many (although of course not all) children, 3 ½ is when they can begin to focus on an instrument and a teacher for more than a few minutes - especially if the instrument is a piano.

3. **CHECK THE ATTENTION SPAN.** If your child can sit for 20 minutes and concentrate on a task - a puzzle, a shape sorter - that child is probably ready for lessons. (If he doesn't sit still for more than 20 seconds, don't despair- he'll get there later!)

4. **START WITH PIANO** I learned long ago (after pulling out a lot of my hair) that stringed instruments are extremely difficult for children under 4½. Piano is so much better. They sit comfortably. There's a palette in front of them - the first thing they do is locate the black and white keys. They focus on listening for high and low tones, and seeing and hearing the differences - that's basic ear training. And they feel gratification from the beginning: Press the key and it sounds good!

There's even scholarly research backing the benefits of piano lessons for little children. In 1996, a University of California team found that preschoolers who took piano lessons showed far greater improvements in spatial reasoning (which relates to mathematical and scientific intelligence) than preschoolers who took singing lessons, computer lessons, or no lessons. (*Neurological Research*, 1996).

5. **MAKE IT SOCIABLE.** Most preschoolers are very social. Our KinderPiano® classes are like a great big playgroup, with the piano as the focus. Children can't wait to see the other kids. If you can't find a class like this near you, consider recruiting a young friend or two to join your child in her beginner's lessons. Having a buddy along makes it MUCH more fun.

6. **DO YOUR HOMEWORK.** Look for someone with experience teaching small children. Talk to other parents, and get several recommendations. With your child, meet the teacher and visit the facility, whether it's a music school, or the instructor's house. A school may have several teachers to choose from. Make sure they will let you switch teachers if the first one doesn't work out.

7. **DO NOT BUY THE INSTRUMENT.** This is one of the most surprising things I've learned from my years in music education. When eager parents of beginners buy the instrument before the class even begins, it's practically a guarantee that the child will fail.

It's all psychological. Parents feel that, because they made a big investment, their kid had better do it. I'm the same way! No one wants to watch their children waste their hard-earned money!

So, if you don't already own the instrument, rent or borrow one for the first classes. You want to be very nurturing and low-key, and minimizing your investment will help you achieve the required tranquility. The most successful families start out with the attitude, "We're just going to try it and see if we like it."

8. **SHOWER THEM WITH JEWELS.** Children are very goal-oriented, so we hand out a LOT of prizes. It can be a sparkly sticker or a stuffed animal - that depends on your budget. When the child gets antsy, we say, "If you can play these three measures, we'll give you a sticker." It works like a miracle!

In our preschool piano classes, everyone has a name card on their keyboard. Whenever a child does something right, the teacher puts a sticker on their name card. By the end of the semester, that name glitters! They also have weekly and monthly practice charts. When they're filled in, the children get to choose a wonderful toy from our treasure chest.

Bribery? I call it 'incentive.' I always ask beginners, "What things do you have to do every day? They'll say, 'brush teeth,' 'get dressed,' 'go to sleep.' I say, "Now you can add one more thing: you have to practice. But in this case - unlike brushing your teeth - you get rewards for doing it."

(When can you stop the incentives? My older kids didn't fully 'own' their musical practice until they were teenagers.)

A sticker or small toy (or later, an allowance) is a small price to pay for a lifetime of benefits. (By the way, I've just discovered an exciting new frontier in the sticker world; adhesive jewels!)

9. **GOT FIVE MINUTES?** While the actual lessons may require a child to focus for a half hour, feel free to set the bar lower for home practice with preschoolers. If your 4-year-old can only put in five minutes a day, that's great. She'll go longer when she's older. Consistency is FAR more important than length of time. They are learning self-discipline, a lesson that will serve them in everything they do.

10. **CREATE A ROUTINE.** Pick a regular place and time of day to practice. For some kids, that's morning. Others prefer bedtime. They start to put their kids to bed (early, of course), and then say, "Whoops, we forgot to practice! Do you want to go to bed now, or to stay up and practice?" Children chose practice every time.

11. **BREAK THE ROUTINE** Some nights, I might create an audience for my 6-year-old, with all her favorite stuffed animals in a circle around her. Another night, I invite her to serenade me in the kitchen while I cook. We have "backwards" night - she does the measures in reverse order. Sometimes I declare 'double sticker' week. I have at least a hundred tricks like this, and make up more on the spot. The wackier, the better.

12. SEEK RECITALS. The word ‘recital’ does not frighten small children the way it frightens you. Most preschoolers love to perform for their family, and to be part of a big event - especially if their little friends are doing the same thing. For our recitals, the children dress up; they shop for a special outfit, including new shoes! Before the performance, the parents are far more nervous than the kids. And afterwards, everyone is ecstatic. Recitals are followed by a reception, which we call a “party,” The kids run around, eat cookies and carrots, accept congratulations, and feel great about themselves. It’s all good!

13. BE SENSITIVE TO PERFECTIONISTS. Just like adults, children do not like to fail. If they realize that they’re not sounding good (don’t you tell them!), they won’t want to practice. That’s another reason prizes are so important – they distract from the fact that they’re not good at it. The reward is for their effort, and even if there’s frustration, at least they get a sticker out of the deal!

14. BE POSITIVE. Always be positive in what you say to your child. Praise them for trying, for practicing every day, for their improvement. Kids thrive on your approval. It will motivate them to keep trying. And end practices on a good note. Have your child play something they love last.

15. GIVE IT FIVE WEEKS. Some music program require a three-month commitment. I think that’s way too long for a preschooler. We’ve found that five weeks is ideal. After five sessions, parents understand the exactly what’s required, and the child does, too.

Quiz: Should my child continue?

After the first five weeks or so of music lessons, ask yourself::

- Did my child learn something?
- Will he practice for at least a few minutes a day?
- How did *I* do? Can I handle the investment of time and energy to make this happen?

If you answered yes to at least two of these questions, you should keep him in lessons.

Most of our preschool students do move on to private lessons after the first five weeks. Or, if they’re old enough (4 ½ minimum), and they’re motivated, some switch to a stringed instrument. The lessons they learned in piano class help enormously when they face the increased complexity of holding and playing a violin, cello or guitar. (They can’t start woodwind instruments until they’re older, since those instruments do not come in small sizes.)

If your young child isn’t ready to continue after the first round of lessons, no worries - you have not wasted your investment. It’s like riding a bicycle: Everything they learned in those first five weeks will still be there when they return to music, whether they’re it’s in 3 months or 3 years.

Music lessons enrich children's lives. The sooner you start them on their musical journey, the better.

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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.