



Why the First 2 Months of Being a Music Parent are the Most Important

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I often observe that many parents hold some age-old assumption that musical talent is God-given or inherited, but let's be clear: *everyone possesses musical talent to some degree*. I believe the high attrition rate of students between the first and second year of musical instrument study in school music programs is partly due to parents who are unsure of how to help their child develop their talents.

Regarding these beginner students who only have one lesson per week in school, the questions remain: *How can parents cultivate their child's talent in its early stages? How can their child gain a lot of progress in the small amount of time school offers music instruction?*

The habits created during the *first two months* after a child receives their instrument have a lot to do with whether or not the child will continue playing beyond the first year of study. Parents play a huge role during this 8 week "window", and with minimal guidance their child can be set up for a lifetime of musical enjoyment and character development.

Why 8 weeks? ~ Many recent studies have concluded that growing new skills requires a minimum of 8 weeks. This doesn't mean that one can *master* a skill in 8 weeks, but a few things *will* happen: Circuitry in the brain will begin to form and create habits (hopefully good ones) after 8 weeks. Grit can be cultivated in students during the first few weeks of musical instrument study. Children and parents tend to make negative judgements about their "talent" and ability too early in the learning phase, especially if they are creating a sound that isn't too great. This is an important time for parents to teach their child to embrace struggle and be patient — their brain needs time to grow. Students who persevere and stick to goals early in music instruction learn valuable life skills such as self-discipline and grit that can last forever.

The inequity of time with instrumental music education in schools ~ Most academic subjects meet every day in elementary school, but instrumental music usually meets once a week in a small group lesson format. As a matter of fact, 8 weeks (56 days) of academic subjects is almost *twice the amount* of instructional time students receive in a *full year* of music instruction.

While the simple math above should have parents immediately emailing school leaders insisting on more days per week of music instruction in their schools, it's more

important to realize that music teachers are working at a disadvantage right off the bat; parents need to be cognizant of their role as supporters of learning at home. It is crucial that parents make sure their child plays their instrument at home most nights, even for 5-10 minutes, in the first two months of instruction in order to avoid frustration, letdown, and quitting.

Here are a few other things parents should do during the first 2 months their child studies a musical instrument:

Parents should understand how the brain works ~ Practicing skills over time causes neural pathways to work better in unison via myelination — a chemical process helping the brain optimize for a set of coordinated activities through “wrapping” the wires of the brain. To improve performance, one needs to practice *frequently*, and get lots of feedback so they practice *correctly*. Myelination basically debunks the theory of “natural talent” — it takes time on task to become good at something, and parents need to realize that their children are capable of being successful at playing an instrument (or doing *anything*) when practiced consistently.

Parents must teach their child to embrace repetition ~ Playing a musical instrument is a great and rewarding way to learn how to embrace repetition. In order to wire our brains to become faster and more accurate, we must repeat actions over and over. The reward of practicing a piece of music correctly — and sounding good as a result — is a great vehicle for parents to teach their children that repetition is not a chore, it’s a life skill that yields some of the greatest benefits imaginable over time when applied to other areas of life.

Parents should fill their child’s mind with beautiful sounds (preferably right before bed) ~ Visualization is one of the most important skills that eventually leads to motivation, grit, confidence and improved performance. Play a recording or watch a video of a great musician with your child right before they go to bed and let their unconscious mind do the rest while they sleep! The more children hear and see greatness, the better model in their head they have to strive towards — and we need a great mental model to be great at something.

Parents should aim to create an independent learner out of their child ~ I call this “giving ownership” of learning to children. Our goal as parents is to help our children improve so much that they no longer need us. The more involved parents are during the first two months of instrument study, the more often they can step back and create moments of independence for their children later. We know that the most successful students are those who take charge of their own learning. Although it’s a little difficult at first, *anyone* is capable of becoming an independent learner with a little willpower and the proper support.

What if your attention to your child’s practice for two short months was the difference between them staying with an instrument for the rest of their life and reaping all the benefits music education has to offer — or quitting after one year? It’s never too late to pay attention to the way your child approaches their instrument study. Try it for 8 weeks and see what happens!