

Successful Teaching Tips for Young Piano Students

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Finding Passion & Falling in Love

- The first skill a child needs to acquire at the piano is a passion for the instrument.
- Our job is to teach the child to fall in love with making music, and teach them to love coming to lessons.
- Without that love, they will never survive and withstand the onslaught of repetitive tasks that come with learning piano.

Before the First Lesson

- Advise parent on studio & payment policies, and what to bring to first lesson. Avoid 'business' talk during the lesson. It's *boring*....

First Lesson

- Introduce yourself. What do you want your student to call you?
- Speak eye-to-eye
- Be enthusiastic
- Have books and materials ready

First Lesson Activities

- Posture on bench
- Distance from keyboard
- Foot stool, cushions, adjustable bench
- Right vs. left hand
- Finger numbers
- Alphabet - name every key
- High vs. low
- Find groups of twos, threes
- Hand position
- Make sure the student PLAYS the piano at the first lesson!
- Arm weight (drop hands on lap, then piano)
- Can fingers make a sound on closed piano lid?

Don't Ask Questions You Don't Really Want Answers To...

- "Do you want to try it on your own now?"
- "Do you want to play this again?"

It's Better to Make Statements...

- *Let's play this again.*
- Be specific: *This time, let's listen for a big difference between piano and forte. When you're done playing, I'm going to ask you if you really heard the difference between your louds and softs.* Exercises like this teach the student to listen to their own playing.
- Another example: *When you're done playing this time, I'm going to ask you if you remembered to make the last note of every phrase soft. Help me listen...*

Give Students Time to Think

- Wait for them to process and compose a response
- Sometimes we ask questions and then blow right on without waiting for an answer
- If you don't really want to wait for an answer, don't ask the question to begin with

Give tasks they will succeed at

- The most effective way to learn is to have a series of successive challenges, where each challenge is only slightly more challenging than the previous
- Huge challenges discourage students — especially when they're young
- *Always* set the student up for success

Give Concise Instructions

- If you speak only a few choice words, the student will really listen when you speak
- Babbling can easily lose the child's attention
- Think before you speak. Word choice is important

Be a Motivator

- The chief goal is not to get through X number of pieces or concepts, but to motivate students to *want* to learn about music
- If you've nurtured their excitement about making music, you've met your goal as a teacher that day.

Share 'True' Statements, even if they aren't!

- *It was hard for me to keep my fingers curved when I started, too.*
- *I always thought I was making an obvious difference between forte and piano, but that must have been in my own head, because nobody else could tell!*

Model Curiosity

- Phrase things as if we are experimenting: *"Let's see what happens when we..."*
- Students are always excited to find out what amazing sounds they can make!

Get Off the Bench If They Start to Wiggle...

- Do they need to use the bathroom?
- Break up sitting activities with activities that allow them to move around a little
- Find or create your own interactive and movement activities that effectively teach the concepts you want them to learn

Off-Bench Ideas

- Alphabet cards on the floor

- Stand up and tap rhythm
- While I play their piece, student stands and hits a drum for every rest. Then we switch!
- “I Spy” with flashcards
- Ear training activities
 - Clap back the rhythm I play
 - Early interval identification (I start with 2nds & 3rds, or steps and skips)

Experience First, Label Later

- Experiencing a concept first, and then labeling it, is the most effective way to learn
- Have student repeat the new concept multiple times (dynamics, articulations, time signature, tempi, etc.)
- Go on a ‘discovery mission’ to find the new symbol in other pieces.

Reinforcement

- ...the way young students begin to remember things
- Young children will often remember that they learned a concept, but might not remember what it’s called
- Present concepts in a variety of ways
- Become familiar with different learning styles - aural, tactile, visual

Young Students...

- Very inquisitive – stay focused!
- Short attention span
- Lessons need to be fun and engaging
- Progress can be slow
- Change strategy or activity if what you’re doing isn’t working.

Rhythm

- Ta & ti-ti are used in schools, so kids often already know this system
- Imitation clap back games
- Clap rhythms of new songs
- Name game

Lesson Length & Time

- Change activities often
- The lesson is over when it’s over
- Put parent on the bench
- Switch places – let the student be the teacher
- Move to the floor
- Is lesson at a good time for the child?

Talk About Home Practice with the Student & Parent

- Establish practice habits, a daily routine of going to the piano
- 5 minutes is fine
- 5 minutes several times a day is even better
- Remain positive and encouraging – think of Suzuki philosophy - "Every child can."

Teaching Mastery

- Repetition games
- Small steps
 1. 5 times perfectly, a 'friend or toy' gets put up on the piano for each perfect execution
 2. 5 times perfectly, a 'friend' goes on the piano for each perfect repetition, *but* a friend is taken away if a mistake is made. False starts count as mistakes
 3. 3 in a row perfectly
- When you demonstrate, exaggerate the concept you are teaching so it's obvious to the student what you're trying to communicate.
- Use 'friends or toys' on right and left side of keyboard.
 - Playing a passage correctly earns a friend at the high end of the keyboard
 - Playing a passage incorrectly earns a friend at the low end of the keyboard
 - Goal = get twice as many friends on the 'right' side than the 'wrong' side.
 - We know it best the way we practice it most.

We Become Experts Through Our Practice Habits

- If we practice with mistakes... *we become an expert at playing with mistakes*
- If we practice with pauses... *we become an expert at playing with pauses*
- If we practice with false starts... *we become an expert at playing with false starts*
- If we stop and fix things every time something happens... *we become experts at stopping & fixing things*
- **Is this what the students wants to be an expert at?**

Teaching Mastery

- If mastery is not possible, we're asking for too much – break it down in attainable steps
- Does the student understand the concept?
- Demonstrate the concept, and ask student to raise their hand if they or hear/see it

Teaching Poise

- Manners
- Presentation skills
- Staying quiet while others perform
- Keep hands below neck
- Self-assessment – ask questions

Create A Social Network

- Group classes
- Recitals
- Outside events
- Back to back lessons – teach your students & parents to greet each other by name

Teacher Attributes

- Nurturing
- ‘Tough’ Love
- Have rules – what are they allowed to touch in your studio?
- Be involved with their lives and care...
- Goody box
- Enthusiasm and positive attitude
- Believe in every child's ability

Is Music for Every Child?

- Students don't fail. Teachers fail. Parents fail. *Students don't fail.*
- Consider a 3 –month trial if child is really young

Definite “Do’s”

- Wear washable clothes
- Speak eye-to-eye
- Find your inner child and let him/her come out

TMI

- Children often share personal things about their parents or family that aren't meant to be shared, or ask inappropriate questions.... Change the subject as soon as possible!

In Closing...

- Love your students
- Nurture their parents
- Develop good human beings
- Reinforce good manners
- There is so much joy in teaching young children
- You are a mentor & role model
- Cherish your responsibility on influencing these young children....