

# POSITIVE TEACHING

## Strategies For Optimal Learning With ADHD And Hyperactive Students

*By Lesley Sisterhen McAllister*

**P**iano teachers have been perfecting their art for more than two centuries, and the history of piano pedagogy places current teachers in a proud lineage with such notable ancestors as C.P.E. Bach and Franz Liszt. Yet, the job description of the piano teacher has continually evolved, especially during

the 20th century, when the focus expanded from standard expectations for note reading and technique to a larger-scale acceptance of people who learn in many different ways and have unique reasons and motivations for piano study.

Current psychologists have the ability to diagnose children with a diverse array of learning disabilities, which helps teachers provide materials and means of instruction that will assist students in meeting their highest potential. Although lists of characteristics may be used to help teachers understand difficulties in learning, it is important to remember that no two children—even the ones deemed “normal” learners—learn in the same way and at the same speed. When this idea is explored, it means we need to modify our behaviors and strategies with every student, because no two children can be taught in exactly the same way.

The good news is, the more students you teach and the more strategies you have under your belt, the more likely you will be to succeed. The key is maintaining an attentive and opportunistic attitude and always taking part in “positive teaching.” Instead of having an idealized version of what goals every student should achieve, a positive teacher is flexible and arranges the pace and sequence of learning based on the particular student’s needs and ability. This does not necessarily mean we do not have high expectations; rather, positive teaching is expecting the best from every student on an individual basis.

### **A Holistic Perspective**

If you take time to consider your teaching philosophy, you may encounter such lofty goals as teaching students to love and appreciate music, giving them the tools to become life-long musicians and helping them to use music for personal expression. Yet, this

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perspective often does not come across in the way we teach. Instead, we often spend the most time perfecting small details such as notes and rhythms rather than the “big picture.” Taking on a broad perspective may illuminate the true joy of making music with students who otherwise might feel like failures.

### Value The Learning Moments

Teaching piano to children requires that you constantly try new strategies, build on what works as much as possible and value the learning moments when they do occur in the lesson. When students see teachers excited about their achievements, it leads to confidence and self-efficacy, which sets in motion the motivation to practice.

As teachers, we have a continuous opportunity to try new things, see what works and add to our repertoire of teaching strategies. Furthermore, we have the pleasure of knowing a population of students who are each as individual and unique as snowflakes. Personality and learning style are characteristics that are tangential to *ability*; although they can be tested separately, they may have an effect on the student’s maturity level and degree of motivation. Therefore, you will not get the full picture at an initial meeting if you are only watching for a student’s musical and intellectual readiness and not paying attention to the distinguishing characteristics of their personality.

The opportunities that arise from teaching such a wide variety of students also come with their own set of challenges. It can be frustrating when you do not understand the underlying cause for a student’s difficulties. The key is not necessarily to begin with the solution, but to start with the right mindset. Showing you “CARE” can strengthen students’ motivation for study while giving you the breathing room to make mistakes and be flexible in your teaching.

### C.A.R.E.: An Acronym For “Positive Teaching”

**C**oncern: Students need to know you are concerned with their well-being as a person and not just as a student. Students who know they are accepted and valued will be much more likely to enjoy their lessons and may even practice more because they do not want to disappoint their teacher. Hyperactive students or others with behavioral disorders often have trouble being accepted by their peers, so music lessons can offer a time for positive affirmation. Take a little time at the beginning of each lesson to chat with your student and find out how their day or week has been before delving into the lesson; you may be one of the few adults in a young person’s life with whom he or she can share one-on-one conversations.

**A**uthenticity: Young children are quick to perceive when someone is being genuine. Being authentic means being true to your own intentions as a teacher and maintaining direct, open communication with your students. Positive teaching is not necessarily being “nice”; rather, it is knowing the capabilities of each student and communicating these expectations clearly.

**R**espect: Students are more likely to respect their teachers when they sense teachers have a mutual respect for them, while still maintaining authority. Respect can be communicated by allowing students to make some decisions with regard to repertoire choice; for example, demonstrating two or three pieces at the same level of difficulty and allowing children to pick their favorite elicits a sense of ownership over the chosen piece.

Another way to communicate respect is to ask questions and give students the opportunity to make musical decisions

independently. Give highly specific questions to keep the lesson moving at an efficient pace and offer cues from other works that have been studied to allow for transfer of learning.

Respect also means teachers listen when students make complaints such as, “This piece is too hard,” or “I can’t memorize this piece in two weeks.” It is usually beneficial to take time to address these complaints during the lesson rather than brushing them off, as long as it has not become a habit of procrastination. Asking follow-up questions such as “What specific passages are difficult in this piece?” may help to solve technical difficulties and uncover useful practice strategies.

**E**mpathy: Seeing students as individuals is part of the process toward empathy. You may never fully be aware of what your student is going through in his daily life; his family may be undergoing problems at home, or a bully at school might be victimizing him. In these situations, music can work as an escape as long as the teacher is nurturing and accepting. Students will pick up on the teacher’s attitude and often adopt that as their personal attitude toward themselves. If they are constantly reprimanded during the lesson, they may begin to see themselves in any of the following ways: a bad student, a slow learner or a person who will never be good at music. Instead, we should continually applaud effort and emphasize the importance of “doing your best”; students will then be more open to learn from honest criticism.

### Seeing Students As Individuals

At the initial interview to prepare for beginning lessons, teachers should be very up-front with parents and ask what may be explained as a “standard question in every interview”: “Does your student have any special needs?” Asking this at

the outset, before working with the child, allows parents to see you are not being judgmental. Some parents are hesitant to tell new teachers about any diagnoses if they are concerned their child will be treated differently than others or will not be accepted into the studio.

One of the more common learning disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), is described below. Previously separated into the categories ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and ADHD, it is now classified under the umbrella term ADHD. Keep in mind that many children may be described as being “hyper,” but the symptoms of ADHD are more pronounced and impair a child’s development, affecting every aspect of his or her life: home, school and with friends.

During the interview and even during the first few lessons, it may be difficult to notice ADHD symptoms, which sometimes disappear when a child is “in a novel setting.”<sup>1</sup> If you know ahead of time that a child has a learning disability, you can do research and reach an informed decision about whether or not you want to take on the responsibility for teaching him.

Teachers can use some of the following teaching strategies with any student who suffers from hyperactivity, whether or not they have ADHD, but they must be designed and modified according to each individual student. Many of these strategies are based on the theory of cognitive behavior modification (CBM). This theory acknowledges the importance of operant learning, in which feedback and/or rewards are given upon completion of a learning task.

Many different types of students with special needs may have difficulty deciding on their own what learning strategies they should implement. These students will need more help from their teacher to learn *how* to learn, a skill that is known as metacognition. An example of a metacognitive strategy is a mnemonic device, which provides an organized framework for the rehearsal

and recall of information. In music, perhaps the most well-known example is the acronym FACE for treble clef space notes and Every Good Boy Does Fine for treble clef line notes.<sup>2</sup>

## Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Children who have been medically classified as having ADHD are not misbehaving or “acting out”; their behaviors are a result of the state of chemicals in the brain. It is a developmental disorder that, according to which source is consulted, affects from as little as 3 percent to as many as 20 percent of children around the world<sup>3</sup> and is diagnosed more frequently in boys than in girls.

The “optimal-stimulation theory” proposes that a certain level of stimulation is needed for optimal cognitive and behavioral functioning to occur. Everyone strives to maintain this level, but children with ADHD appear to have difficulty getting the same amount of stimulation as others do from the same source and are often acting in an attempt to heighten their stimulation.<sup>4</sup> Children with ADHD tend to crave high-stimulus situations, are usually emotionally volatile and may not have much awareness of their impact on others.<sup>5</sup>

In traditional private music lessons, as well as classrooms, children are usually expected to sit still, avoid talking and act in response to the adult’s instructions, rather than acting impulsively. This type of environment may, in fact, increase a teacher’s perception of ADHD symptoms because of the type of demands put on the student. To motivate students and elicit success during lessons, teachers must be prepared to reinforce good behavior, keep a flexible approach and use a series of short segments with little verbal instruction to keep students on-task.

Though hyperactivity is usually associated with ADHD, not all students who are classified with this disorder are hyperactive. The four common symptoms of ADHD are hyperactivity, inat-

ention, impulsivity and socially inappropriate behavior. Students may demonstrate some or all of these characteristics, and they generally fall into one of three different subtypes: predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, predominantly inattentive, or combined hyperactive-impulsive and inattentive, which is the most common type.<sup>6</sup>

Since every student is different, three of the four symptoms will be explored in detail, and potentially beneficial teaching strategies will be described. Socially inappropriate behavior is generally not a problem in private lessons, but may present difficulties in group settings; this happens, for example, when a student pushes or shoves others or invades the space of other students. In these cases, students can have key words as reminders for positive social skills, such as “Keep your hands to yourself,” and they can be asked to freeze in place at opportune moments when they need to gain awareness of their actions.

For all students with ADHD, it is important to maintain a variety of activities during music lessons, including physical movement, written activities (such as drawing on a chalkboard or dry erase board), active listening, and/or rhythm work. “Lab” time with computer software is also very effective for these students, since they tend to focus better when using a computer.<sup>7</sup>

## Hyperactivity

Of the four common symptoms of ADHD, hyperactivity is the most recognizable. Hyperactive students must be moving almost all the time; they are constantly squirming, fidgeting with their hands or getting up from their seat. They may talk excessively and demonstrate a general feeling of restlessness, perhaps engaging in “disorganized and purposeless activity.”<sup>8</sup> Since some hyperactivity is common among all young children, teachers should have a variety of teaching strategies at their fingertips to cope with this tendency.

Nontraditional modes of instruction are often necessary with students who

are hyperactive, and a balance of group or partner work may be used to offset the demands of the private lesson. Offering task-oriented reward activities gives students a sense of responsibility; examples include filling out the assignment sheet after the lesson is over, putting a sticker on the assignment sheet or piece, or writing in the date they started and finished each piece.

If students are usually seated while playing their instrument, they might be occasionally allowed to stand while playing, especially in the early-elementary levels when note naming, rhythm and experiments with sound may be studied separately from technique. Another way to add variety to the lesson is to give a student the option of which instrument they want to play if there are multiple instruments in the studio; furthermore, they might be allowed to change instruments in the middle of the lesson. These students also need a place to expel their energy. Allowing students to wiggle just their toes or feet rather than entire bodies, or giving them stress relief balls at certain intervals during the lesson may partly accommodate the need for stimulation.

In extreme situations you may designate a specific space in the studio as a “wiggle” zone; students can move as much as they want in that space, before or at mid-point during the lesson.<sup>9</sup> Of course, structured movement activities are the best way to combine musical learning with energy expulsion. For example, during transitions, teachers can play music and let students move to what they hear. Any whole-body movement activity may be used to teach rhythmic values and a steady beat, as well as improvisation and musical issues such as piano/forte or crescendo/decrescendo.

Interestingly, students sometimes imitate their teacher’s demeanor. At crucial points during the lesson, lowering your own energy level—talking more quietly or slowly, for example, and slowing down the pace of activities—will get students’ attention and model a more relaxed approach.

### Inattention

Students who seem to be “day-dreamers” or have a hard time listening and focusing during lessons are considered inattentive. They may be easily distracted or fail to give attention to detail, and they may have difficulty in organizing their own work. Common characteristics of inattentive students include careless mistakes, avoiding pieces they dislike or not following through with instructions. Inattentive children have difficulty performing two tasks at the same time and may find it difficult to maintain focus for an extended amount of time.

For these students, it is beneficial to list very specific practice strategies in a checklist style for review at home because they may forget what was said during the lesson. They will also retain more information when teachers decrease the length of verbal instruction by asking shorter questions and allowing time for students to experiment with corrections or changes in their music.

Perhaps the most beneficial teaching strategy I have found with all students is making an outline of the lesson plan for the student to follow and check off during the lesson when each activity has been accomplished. This works especially well with students who are “watching the clock,” enabling them to focus attention on lesson content rather than lesson duration. This “advance organizer” gives an overview of what will be learned, giving students a framework for material in a way that helps them form more efficient neural networks.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, make sure the teaching area is free of excess materials. Keep your decorations simple and put away any potentially tempting items; provide only the necessary supplies, since you do not want students grabbing pencils or stickers to play with during the lesson. Anticipation is perhaps the most important skill a teacher can develop, because thinking ahead about possible distractions will eliminate problems before they arise.

### Impulsivity

Impulsivity is often linked to hyperactivity, and while these two characteristics are similar, there are some additional symptoms of impulsivity. These include difficulty waiting for a turn, interrupting or intruding on others, blurting out answers to questions before they have been completed and needing immediate gratification. Impulsive children sometimes lack “personal space” and may have difficulty controlling their emotions, especially anger.<sup>11</sup>

For these students, it is important to provide clear guidelines for the lesson environment and give immediate feedback for their behavior, rewarding them with praise when possible. For a quick visual reminder, make a list of the primary studio rules and post them for the student to easily read. The list should be as simple and succinct as possible, consisting of no more than four statements.<sup>12</sup> A sample rule list might read in the following way: “listen; follow directions; do your best.” The rules should be stated positively, as “dos” rather than “don’ts.”

To reinforce the importance of the rules, have the student read them aloud at the beginning of each lesson. After a couple of lessons, they should be memorized. When necessary, point to the list to let students know as soon as possible that they are not following the rules. Older students or more mature students can design their own list of rules, which will give them a sense of responsibility. A technique called “proactive discipline,” which is the opposite of “reactive discipline,” entails anticipating behaviors and preparing a positive way to deal with them. If teachers wait until the student misbehaves, they may end up spending precious lesson time on finding solutions to behavior problems.<sup>13</sup>

Developing tools for self-reflection helps these students become aware of their interaction with others. One way to do this is to ask the student to assess his behavior at the end of the lesson. Another strategy is to use a “token

economy,” in which students can earn tokens for appropriate behavior or work that is completed correctly.<sup>14</sup> These tokens, which may take the form of “music bucks” that look like dollar bills, can be exchanged for material items chosen by the student such as toys or special privileges. The most effective rewards are generally tangible and are given immediately, rather than after a delay.

Some students will present behavioral difficulties, such as refusing to pay attention, neglecting to practice, or following their own whims during the lesson. It may be necessary in these situations to create a behavioral contract with the student and parent to negotiate consequences for inappropriate behavior; these might include ending the lesson early or giving a lesson “grade” that will be shared with the parent.

### Conclusions

For students who are impulsive, inattentive or hyperactive, the expectations placed in front of them during private lessons can add an extra level of stress that may be relieved, in part, by excessive movement. To decrease stress, teachers should promote a calm and relaxing atmosphere in their studio, considering the effects of lighting and perhaps adding such relaxing elements as fish tanks or plants.<sup>15</sup>

Those who have been diagnosed with ADHD need an established routine that gives structure to the lesson. Being able to predict the order of events can help students to relax. Furthermore, previewing upcoming activities with cues prepares them to pay attention. A cue could be a statement such as “This new piece includes eighth notes, so let’s find all the eighth notes first.”

Simply asking the student to look in your eyes with the reminder “Let me see your eyeballs” or asking them to repeat what you said reinforces the importance of active listening, and it is especially useful during the introduction of new concepts. It is also helpful

to remember that excessive movement may not be a sign that students are being inattentive. In fact, research has shown that students with ADHD often need to move as a form of “self-stimulation” in order to pay attention and stay on task.<sup>16</sup>

Teachers of any student should think about what tools students need to succeed before, during and after the lesson. A clear routine, rules and consequences for inappropriate behavior must be established before the lesson begins. Having a succinct outline of the lesson plan on a piece of paper or dry-erase board helps students understand the structure of the lesson. Rules and consequences should be established in close proximity to the student and with eye contact. During the lesson, students need previewing of what is coming ahead, smooth transitions within a variety of activities, and a positive, calm atmosphere. Even students who are attentive during the lesson will find their mind wandering after about 5 to 7 minutes of the same activity, so keep segments short and use different approaches often, even when working on a single concept. When the lesson concludes, students need clear practice strategies that have been reinforced during the lesson; physical activities may even be listed on the assignment sheet to provide variety during home practice.

Music teachers have a unique opportunity to reach students with learning disorders. Through positive interaction with an adult, students can begin to develop tools for organization, socially appropriate behavior and focused attention. Many children will be more successful working one-on-one in private lessons rather than in a group class, which provides additional opportunities for distraction.

In addition to the act of making music, the patience and concentration required in practice and during lessons may have a strong influence on a child’s mental and emotional development. If we carefully examine our

preconceived notions of what is expected of students, we can adjust our teaching strategies to arrange success for all students. When students have a strong foundation of motivation and confidence in their abilities, the possibilities for accomplishment are unlimited. ☺

### Notes

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2. Shannon K. de L’Etoile, “Teaching Music to Special Learners: Children with Disruptive Behavior Disorders,” *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 5 (May 2005), 39.
3. Lougy, DeRuvo, and Rosenthal, 3.
4. de L’Etoile, 39.
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6. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
7. *Ibid.*, 71.
8. *Ibid.*, 18.
9. John Alban-Metcalf and Juliette Alban-Metcalf, *Managing Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom: Practical Strategies for Teachers* (London: David Fulton Publishers Ltd., 2001), 53.
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12. Nancy Mather and Sam Goldstein, *Learning Disabilities and Challenging Behaviors: A Guide to Intervention and Classroom Management* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes, 2001), 153.
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14. de L’Etoile, 41.
15. Robert Evert Cimer, *Making ADHD a Gift: Teaching Superman How to Fly* (Baltimore, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 60.
16. Lisa L. Weyandt, *AN ADHD Primer*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 76.