

# understanding and nurturing parents

*By Merlin B. Thompson*

## *A Studio Music Teacher's Reflections On Parental Interest And Involvement*

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became the first Canadian to graduate from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute following a three-year mentorship with Suzuki Method founder Shinichi Suzuki.



A heartwarming advertisement frequently airs when I'm relaxing in front of the TV. Its scenario is simple—a father leaves his office, gets into his car, taps a few buttons on his car phone and settles back as the sound of his child's violin performance fills the car interior. While some people might be impressed by the technology involved, I appreciate this advertisement for its portrayal of the unconditional love and support parents have for their children. It captures the sentiment I felt from my own mom and dad, and the commitment I see in my students' parents. This advertisement serves as a meaningful reminder that while my studio music instruction focuses on students, my teaching naturally reaches beyond individual students to include the interest and involvement of their parents.

Drawing from my own three-decade experience of working with parents, my purpose in this article is to explore what it means for teachers to understand and nurture the parents of their students. I use the language of “understand”

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and “nurture” because, in one respect, teachers need to develop an honest and balanced understanding of parents, while, from another perspective, teachers play a nurturing role in helping parents get a sense of what their child’s musical adventure might entail and how parents’ frame of mind may contribute to their child’s success. For me, it’s all about encouraging parents to see their children through their own capable and very insightful eyes.

I have scant childhood memories of my parents talking with my piano teachers. Every week, either my mom or dad dropped me off at my various piano teachers’ studios, some of whom lived more than an hour from our Saskatchewan farmstead. They had obligatory rushed conversations at the beginning of the term and following performances, but other than that, it seemed my parents had very little connection to my instructors. When I began teaching piano at the McGill Conservatory in the late 1970s, I followed the pattern from my childhood—I taught students who attended lessons on their own. When students arrived for lessons with their parents, I politely ushered parents out of the studio, explaining that my goal was to create an environment where students were responsible for their own learning, even though I knew that was not the whole story. The real reason for my wanting parents out of the studio was because I worried parents would find my teaching to be inadequate, that they would be critical of my limited teaching experience.

All that changed in 1980 when I met a group of Suzuki piano teachers. Encouraged by their experiences with parental involvement and my own interest in an ear-before-eye approach, I contacted my students’ parents

and said, “I’ve noticed whenever I introduce a new piece by playing it on the piano, your child catches on right away.” Most parents had already made a similar observation. “Now, I’m thinking of using a book of pieces that has a recording to go along with it,” I continued, and they agreed that listening to the recording at home was a good idea. “I’ve also noticed that when you help your child at home, things go better—so if you want to sit in on lessons, that would be great.” Soon after, parents started sitting in on lessons, and it wasn’t long before I let go of my insecurities as a novice teacher. Gradually I found myself comfortably working with parents because of the shared trust and belief in what we were undertaking. Learning to play a musical instrument within this child-parent-teacher triangle genuinely felt like the right thing to do.

Following a three-year teacher apprenticeship with Shinichi Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan, I settled into a career of studio piano teaching. Looking back on more than 30 years of teaching, it’s interesting to note how various events contribute to my understanding of parents and their involvement. Suzuki’s example during my apprenticeship remains an enduring inspiration. Pivotal conversations with colleagues come into play. And of course, listening to parents express their concerns, hopes and dreams, limitations, conflicts and successes provides an ongoing influence on my understanding of the parent’s perspective. As a framework for understanding and nurturing parents, I consider three essential questions—Who is the parent’s most practical resource? What does it mean for parents to be involved? What is the purpose of learning to play a musical instrument?

## Who Is The Parent’s Most Practical Resource?

Given that music teachers know a great deal about both music and teaching, and that teachers have experienced the rigors involved in learning to play a musical instrument for themselves, it seems logical that teachers would necessarily be parents’ most practical resource. However, my lengthy experience working with parents would indicate the contrary. This does not mean teachers have little to offer parents; rather, parents’ practical needs may be more closely aligned with a resource other than teachers.

At a music conference during my novice teaching years, I was speaking with a colleague who was a cello instructor. When I asked her what stood out as a “light bulb” moment in her teaching that year, she replied, “I’ve noticed that the students, whose parents make friends with other parents in my studio, always seem to do well.” I nearly fell over with astonishment. I had noticed precisely the same phenomenon in my own studio without ever making the connection between parent-peer relationships and student success. My colleague’s observation made perfect sense because more than any one else, another parent would understand the difficulties and the rewards of music study, even more than a teacher with parenting experience. Another parent would know what it feels like to overcome obstacles and celebrate a child’s musical achievements. A parent peer would more intuitively understand what it is like when children do not want to practice, when children declare they equally hate their instrument, their parents and their music teachers.

Louise Iscoe and Karen Bordelon explained that parent-peer relationships

seem to provide the one thing that is beyond professionals in any field—that is another parent who understands.<sup>1</sup> Parent peers fill a much-needed role that adds an important dimension to parents' relationships with and understanding of their child by offering a practical resource for parents that addresses areas outside the experience of teacher professionals. This sentiment is echoed in Martha Bell, Ruth Fitzgerald, and Michael Legge's acknowledgement that parent peers provide the most valuable assistance by listening and offering "an informed, experience-based perspective."<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that parents need recurrent opportunities to develop friendships with other parents, I make sure parents get to know each other by deliberately introducing them to each other and encouraging them to exchange phone numbers or e-mail addresses—it only takes a matter of seconds at the end of a lesson or concert. I continually reinforce the resource they are for each other, emphasizing how one parent's insight has meaning for another and how parent-peer conversations will twist and turn through matters important to them that I cannot foresee.

Through parent-peer relationships, parents bring meaningful hands-on experience into their conversations. By talking about their experiences, parents take stock of the conflicts and celebrations, problems and solutions that are part of daily life. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, when parents talk about their parenting experiences with other parents, they give voice to their own sense of self. When parents share the sometimes chaotic and improbable details of their parenting experiences with other parents, they intuitively hear themselves in each

other's stories; they recognize their own voices in the commonality of shared parental experience. Of course, there are other resources for parents such as teachers, grandparents and in-laws. However, because parent peers operate "in the trenches," actively participating in the daily challenges and pleasures of raising children, peer relationships may support and empower parents' deeply rooted sense of self in ways that only other parents can provide.

#### What Does It Mean For Parents To Be Involved?

Music education research to date provides significant evidence that parents' interest and involvement in their child's musical study has a positive impact on student achievement regardless of parental expertise in the field of music.<sup>3</sup> Parental support is consistently recognized as providing an effective influence on children's motivation, involvement, persistence and ongoing musical commitment. Equally relevant are conclusions by education researchers that parental influence on children's behavior is extensive.<sup>4</sup> Challenges facing parental involvement often emerge because parents regard music study as an activity children ideally pursue in response to the child's intrinsically grounded desire.

Given the intimate nature of parent-child relationships, it is not surprising that conflicts arise as a result of discrepancies between parental expectations and children's musical preferences or commitments to practice. Under such circumstances, as Andrea Creech explained, "it is important for children to sustain a sense of being emotionally supported by their parents even in the face of disagreements."<sup>5</sup> Taking such interpersonal tensions into consideration, it is interesting to

note how conflict's reputation is generally assumed to be a negative one. Conflict is interpreted as an obstacle to successful student achievement; it's a problematic aspect of learning to play a musical instrument that under ideal circumstances should be minimized or avoided, if not completely eliminated. Yet in my own teaching, rather than categorically avoiding conflict, I carefully consider this instructional characteristic as a matter of *acceptable tension*. I draw on the value of conflict for its potential to contribute positively to successful student achievement.

Many prominent educators—John Dewey, Leon Festinger, Daniel Berlyne—have established a clear link between dissonant experiences and learning development.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in observing Suzuki's teaching during my three-year apprenticeship in Japan, it was virtually impossible to ignore Suzuki's enthusiasm for *acceptable tension* in taking students just slightly beyond their comfort zone. At times, it seemed there was no end to the challenges Suzuki could think of, as if he was always looking just slightly beyond his student's successful achievements to consider what would come next. What would be the next appropriate *acceptable tension*? What I appreciate about the idea of *acceptable tension* is the reminder that learning to play a musical instrument is not a smooth trajectory without ups and downs. Musical exploration, study and performance naturally involve conflict, upsets, tension and opposition. My job as teacher is to make sure, as much as possible, that *tension* is always at an *acceptable* level, that disagreements are manageable and that upsets get resolved so that learning to play a musical instrument is satisfying, fun and rewarding.

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When it comes to parental involvement in their child's music studies, I realize parents may encounter tension when reminding their child to practice. And, whereas many parents remain steadfast in reminding their child to do academic homework over a period of several years, the support they give their child in terms of musical practice tends to drop off toward the end of the child's first year of musical studies—at the very time they needed ongoing parental encouragement to continue.<sup>7</sup> Yet, music education research by Creech clearly indicates young children, adolescents and teenagers alike value the support and interest of their parents.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, I make sure parents understand that reminding their child to practice might be an example of *acceptable tension* they can handle. I want them to know some tensions are more valuable than others and being able to respond appropriately to tensions or conflicts is an essential component in children's learning about and preparing for the challenges of life. I encourage parents to figure out how *acceptable tension* fits in with who they are as parents and the vision they have of their child in adulthood. In this way, parental involvement is reflective of the values parents want to pass on to their child; it's not a sanitized problem-free process that occurs outside the realities of life. It is a journey in which parents—students and teachers—experience, respond to and prepare for the *acceptable tensions* that come with the fullness of life.

## What Is The Purpose Of Learning To Play A Musical Instrument?

During my teacher apprenticeship at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute, I frequently stepped in as a substitute teacher for members of the

Suzuki piano faculty. One afternoon, having gotten comfortable with the students and their parents over several months, I asked a mother why she had enrolled her daughter in piano lessons. One by one, she articulated various reasons for choosing music instruction for her daughter: love of music, responsibility, brain development, time management, enjoyment, influence on other subjects, recreation and more. While it might seem as if this mother identified an entire range of topics, there is one concept that acts as an umbrella for her diverse answers. It is the Greek concept of *Paideia*, the philosophy that “education is not mastery of subject matter but mastery of one's person.”<sup>9</sup> Through learning to play a musical instrument, people get a sense of who they are as a person.<sup>10</sup>

Music gives spark to the flame that is the individual's sense of self. No matter the level of musicianship—whether amateur or professional—music ignites something deep inside every person. No matter how much time musicians spend at the instrument, no matter how difficult or easy the piece, no matter whether or not they finish learning a piece—musicians go back for more because music reminds them of who they are. As Suzuki affirmed in describing his own experience with music, “The real essence of art turned out to be not something high up and far off. It was right inside my ordinary self.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, we learn to play a musical instrument because of how we feel when we connect to music. We learn to play a musical instrument because music connects us with who we are.

One thing I enjoy sharing with parents is how learning to play a musical instrument can serve as their child's intimate and fruitful avenue for exercising, exploring and experi-

encing their sense of self. This is not to say that musical adventures are the only avenues for meaningful personal exploration. Not in the least. Rather, through musical studies, improvisations, celebrations and frustrations, children get a particular picture of who they are. Children reinforce who they are in the ways they make music—whether it's out-of-control fast and loud, or the loving expressions of emotional mastery. Perhaps that explains why children commonly seek out their own challenging musical encounters as a way of testing or proving who they are as persons, as their own way of purposely demonstrating to teachers and parents the self-affirming value they derive from being true to themselves.

## Conclusions And Implications

This reflective investigation regarding parents in the context of studio music instruction has considered the questions: Who is the parent's most practical resource? What does it mean for parents to be involved? And, what is the purpose of learning to play a musical instrument? Responses to these questions indicate three dynamic themes: parent peers, acceptable tension and music study as the “mastery of one's person.” Remarkably, these themes demonstrate a subtle, yet consistent, thread in terms of the individual's sense of self. Throughout this investigation, who we are as persons repeatedly surfaces as integral both to parental involvement and to the child's process of learning to play a musical instrument.

Highlighting our sense of self sheds light on why parents' distinct personal contributions are important to their child's learning to play a musical instrument. While parents bring practical concerns and hopeful aspirations for their children, more significantly,



they also implicitly and explicitly convey personal philosophies and attitudes anchored by who they are as persons. Parents reveal themselves in conversations with their child, in their responses to music and in the stories they tell about themselves, about their children, music, education and life. The problem facing parents' sense of self is that despite education literature's enthusiastic endorsement of parental involvement, as Nichole Stitt and Nancy Brooks have asserted, many instructional settings simply dismiss or discount the parent's perspective in favor of the teacher's professional viewpoint and the child's perspective.<sup>12</sup> Parents are treated much like placeholders whose involvement is determined as a matter of teacher-directed or student-centered application. The only avenue for parents is through the eyes of teachers and students. In contrast to such disempowering limitations on parental perspectives, I propose an alternative approach—the sincere invitation to parents' own first-hand understanding of their child, of education and music, and the closely held meaning they take from being true to themselves. In this way, my understanding and nurturing of parents is always reflective of who they are as a person, of the meaningful values they embody and of our mutually shared desire to create a stimulating and rewarding musical environment for their child.

Examining my 30 years' experience as a studio music instructor, what I most appreciate is how our philosophies, values, beliefs and attitudes are intrinsically embedded in the process of learning to play a musical instrument. Acknowledging the importance of interacting with each other reminds me that music instruction is not limited to the dictates of student-centric,

or parent-controlled or teacher-directed paradigms. Rather, by developing an understanding of one another and accepting each other as persons, learning to play a musical instrument expands what we know about ourselves and each other. In this way, learning to play a musical instrument brings about two substantial accomplishments. First and perhaps most obviously, musical explorations provide the safe, yet dynamic, environment for artistic encounters and meaning making. Secondly and perhaps with less apparent intentions, such musical adventures pull each of us to consider not only who we are, but also what we have yet to imagine about ourselves, about each other, about music and about life. ♪

### Notes

1. L. Iscoe & K. Bordelon, "Pilot parents: Peer support for parents of handicapped children." *Children's Health Care*, 14, no. 2 (1985): 103–109.

2. M. Bell, R. Fitzgerald, & M. Legge, "Parent peer advocacy, information and refusing disability discourses." *New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 8, nos. 1–2 (2013): 1–12.

3. Benjamin Bloom, *Developing talent in young people* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); Andrea Creech, "The role of the family in supporting learning." In S. Hallam, & I. T. Cross, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 295–306; J. Davidson, M. Howe, & J. Sloboda, "The role of parents in the success and failure of instrumental learners." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 127, (1995) 40–44; Gary McPherson & J. Davidson, "Playing an instrument." In G. McPherson, *The Child as Musician* (Oxford: Oxford

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4. See A. Gonzalez-DeHass, P. Willems, & M. Doan Holbein, "Examining the relationship between parental involvement and student motivation." *Educational Psychology Review*, 17, (2005) 99–123; N. Stitt & N. Brooks, "Reconceptualizing parent involvement: Parent as accomplice or parent as partner?" *Schools: Studies in Education*, 11, no. 1 (2014), 75–101.

5. Creech (2009). The role of the family.

6. The works of John Dewey's (1933) theory of uncertainty, Leon Festingers' (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, and Daniel Berlyne's (1960) curiosity theory in this direction.

7. McPherson & Davidson (2006). Playing an instrument.

8. Creech (2009). The role of the family.

9. D.W. Orr, *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 2004) 13.

10. J. Davidson, & K. Burland, (2006). "Musician identity formation." In G. McPherson, *The Child as Musician* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 475–490; D. Hargreaves, R. MacDonald, & D. Miell, "Musical identities mediate musical development." In G. McPherson, & G. Welch, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 125–142.

11. Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by love*. (Hicksville: Exposition Press Inc., 1969) 94.

12. Stitt, & Brooks, "Reconceptualizing parent involvement."