



# On Structuring Practice at Home

## Ten Points to Ponder

by Enid Wood

1. **Practice** more often than not.  
 "You only need to practice on the days you eat." –Shinichi Suzuki
  - Why? Regular, consistent practice develops the mind, body, and spirit.
  - If practice is a normal part of the daily routine, we don't waste energy deciding whether or not to practice; it just gets done.
  - Charts can be motivating. Use a mark or a sticker to record each day's practice.
  - Rewards are sometimes appropriate, for example covering a small box with stickers for each day's practice and getting what's inside the box once the outside is full. This can be especially effective for children who are collectors of small things.
  - Practice can be a way for children to earn something they want.
  - View practice as learning for you and not just your child. They don't want to be expected to feel grateful for adult sacrifices.
  - You may not want to call it "practice." One mother called it "Violin Club" for years until the music became its own reward. Or just say, "Play the piano."
  - Use it or lose it. We forget four out of every five things we learn unless the learning is reinforced within 24 hours.
2. **Listen** to recorded music.
  - Music is easily absorbed from the environment.
  - If children are struggling to remember the sequence of notes, they won't be free to work on technique or interpretation.
  - Listen sometimes to review pieces and to the next book.
  - Have more than one CD: one for the bedroom, the car, and the breakfast table.
3. **Review** the repertoire.  
 "Children like what they can do."  
 –Shinichi Suzuki
  - Find ways to make the listening easy and automatic.
  - The repeat function on a CD player can help kids learn tricky music without getting up.
  - Review pieces are like an ever-increasing vocabulary. We *add* new pieces; we don't replace the old ones.
  - "Surf 'n' Turf": Productive practice includes a balance between playing through pieces in their entirety and isolating small sections in order to dig out the beauty in them.
  - Discover your own optimum balance between old and new. Doing *twice as much review as new* is a wise plan for many families, because it builds confidence and reinforces skill.
  - Review for memory, tone, posture, emotional impact, and concentration. Music is far more than a succession of correct notes.
  - Toys, charts, and games can help.
    - ❖ Spinner.
    - ❖ Fishing. Make a new fish each time a new tune is learned.
  - Do it/Done it (envelopes or jars)  
 Draw from one and put into the other until empty.
  - Chart. No tune is allowed to be more than five marks ahead of another one.
4. **Group** activities provide Suzuki students with role models, peer influence and goals.
  - Families who make group attendance a priority are assured of success in music if group playing is supported by efficient individual practice at home.
  - Extroverts may need group playing in order to see any value in music making whatsoever.
5. **Master** each small step before going on.  
 "Never stop. Never hurry."  
 –Shinichi Suzuki
  - Attending a Suzuki institute in the summer helps kids who can't come to weekly groups during the rest of the year.
  - Join orchestras, bands, or choirs. They can be the most valuable experiences in a young person's life.
  - Thoroughly mastering *each* small step leads to excellence for all.
  - Charting can work as a visual record of progress toward a fixed goal. Mark when something is done, when it is memorized, when it is fluent, when the tone is beautiful, when the playing becomes heartfelt.
6. **Repeat**, repeat, repeat.  
 "Ability is knowledge plus 10,000 times." –Shinichi Suzuki
  - Music can be habit-forming.
  - Practice does not necessarily make perfect. Practice makes *permanent*. Make certain your child is making sounds you both want to hear again.
  - Healthy practice makes playing easy.
  - Repeat not just until something is right, but keep going until it *can't* go wrong.
  - Counting repetitions can be fun. Use toys, charts or food.
    - ❖ Dice: How many repetitions? Which dynamic? Which articulation?
    - ❖ Flip a coin.
    - ❖ Dominoes: line them up and knock them down.
    - ❖ A line of stuffed toys disappears behind the sofa, one by one.
    - ❖ Fishing with magnets
    - ❖ Puzzles
    - ❖ Board games: snakes and ladders, etc

- ❖ White boards: compose music.
- ❖ Scratch cards
- ❖ Graph paper
- ❖ Felt boards: dinosaurs in a landscape, etc.
- ❖ Paper chains
- ❖ Paper clip chains
- ❖ Rubber stamps
- ❖ Coloring books
- ❖ Dot-to-dot books
- ❖ Building block tower
- Reverse psychology can sometimes work. If Junior plays the correct fingering, Mom doesn't get to eat the raisin.
- Things usually improve remarkably after seven repetitions. Don't give up too soon.

7. **Tone** can be irresistible.  
 "Tone is the living soul."  
 –Shinichi Suzuki

- Begin and end practice with beautiful sounds. Beginnings and endings are what humans remember best. If you make beautiful tone today you'll both feel like practicing tomorrow.
  - Let students discover how their instrument responds to their movements. Calling it "research" lets children see how important their experiments are.
8. Attention to **Posture**, balance, and the release of tension will prevent injury, eliminate discomfort, and make expressive playing possible.  
 "Excess force blunts perception."  
 –Alice Joy Lewis

- Children are attracted to playing that is effortless, relaxed, and carefree. Bring students to professional concerts so that they can observe the playing of experts.
- A weak muscle is a stiff muscle. Daily practice, review and repetition (see above) can make strong muscles.
- Develop sensitivity and the connection between what is heard and what is felt. This will make the child's playing personal and lead to a sense of ownership.
- Make certain that kids know it's safe and natural to make mistakes. Fear leads to tension, which gets in the way of efficient, expressive playing.
- Technique can be a game. Flip a coin for concentration on left or right hand. Use board games, puzzles, or card games to suggest technical goals.

9. **Parental Participation.**  
 "Every child can succeed. It all depends upon the parents." –Shinichi Suzuki

- Daily practice with a parent is the single greatest advantage for the Suzuki student. Remember that unsupervised practice can be both lonely and unproductive.
- Two heads are better than one.
- Sometimes we are expected to sit in silence while our children practice. This is fine as long as both parent and student are listening.

10. **Respectful & Positive Interaction.**  
 "Nothing improves hearing more than praise. –Shinichi Suzuki

- Choose appropriate goals.
- Keep your tone of voice friendly.
- Quit while you're ahead. End a practice session while both of you are still having fun.
- Silence the inner critic.
- Establish a safe place for musical growth. First, praise cooperation and completion of a task. Next, notice beauty and individuality. Only after all that is said and done is it safe to request changes in playing.
- Awaken the inner researcher.
- Emergency measures: Find the fun. Back up and ask for only what can be done with certain success.
- Children will only learn if they have the desire and are mentally, physically, and emotionally ready. Asking for too much too soon invites children to stop trying.
- Don't expect perfection from yourself. ☞

**Enid Wood** lives in Pittsburgh and teaches violin and musicianship at The Pittsburgh Music Academy, Inc. She started learning the piano from the age of five, taught by her mother, and started violin lessons (in a group) at age nine at the local public school. She earned a B.A. in Art, Music and Elementary Education at Westminster College in Salt Lake City and went on to complete an M.A. in music education at San Francisco State University, in a long-term Suzuki teacher training program. Most of her career was spent in Europe. She taught violin in England for 16 years and was editor of the British Suzuki Institute journal, *Ability Development*. She has taught violin, chamber music, and music theory at workshops in four countries. Her writing has been published in Britain, Holland, Australia, Poland, and the U.S.A.

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