

by Winifred Crock



Suzuki Practice For Parents: Basics, Priorities and Creative Ideas

Encouraging creative practice is one of the most fun, yet challenging jobs a parent has. The following are some practice tips for parents with school-age children.

The Basics of Practice

Establish an expectation of daily practice.

As a family, you must decide that music is a vital part of a child's education and that regular practice is as necessary as studying math or reading. Practice needs to be a planned daily activity and the parent has to be the planner. It is easier to get children to practice if a daily habit is established. The question is when to practice, not if to practice. Not if, but when!

Set a pattern of when to practice.

Take into account a child's readiness, but remember parents are directing the activity. A few minutes of down time after school or after an activity can be beneficial. Help your child transition from another activity with a reminder that practice time will start "in five minutes" or "when we get home." Getting ready for practice may include a snack, a trip to the bathroom, a change of shoes and clothes, etc. If the regular time is not available for the day, plan ahead for a different time.

Practice together everyday.

You are the extra set of eyes and ears that make practice more efficient, more focused and hopefully more fun. Your positive attitude, your expectation of success and your direction help your child's progress immeasurably. At my child's program at SW Edwardsville, the everyday practice contest requires only 10 minutes of practice a day. Only 10 minutes!? The good news is most students will continue long past that point once they actually get started.

Plan a regular practice routine.

Suzuki practice routines usually include tonalization, scales, review work, preview spots, technical exercises, new pieces and sight-reading. Hopefully you will practice everything, everyday with your child, but sometimes life can get in the way! If you are very busy on a given day, prioritize and you can still accomplish a lot! Ask yourself what you can accomplish and what is most important.

Practice Priorities

#1. Listening

Daily listening is one of the most important parts of Suzuki learning, but often isn't even considered part of daily practice. It is the foundation of effortless progress, and it is also a great way to continue learning when life foils your best plans to practice. Listen in the morning and evening for "wake up" and "go to bed" music. Listen in the car. Listen when your family is canoeing through the Grand Canyon and can't bring the cello. Listen when you or your child is too sick to practice. If your child is having trouble with a section of the current piece, listen. Try listening to a piece 100 times before your child begins to play

it and watch how much easier learning becomes.

#2. Repertoire Review

One goal of repertoire review is to allow your child to focus on advanced learning beyond the basics of a piece. It is also to provide technical and musical foundations for new repertoire. Finally, it is to establish a large repertoire of wonderful music that they can just play! Review is crucial to easy, continuous learning.

Set up a regular schedule of review with your teacher that will enable your child to play all of his repertoire from memory easily. Consider your child's age and playing level, and your teacher's expectations. This review schedule needs to be one that your family can realistically accomplish. In Book One, every piece, every day is a wonderful goal. Beyond Book One, a repertoire rotation each week is often recommended.

If you ever find your child's review repertoire is not technically solid or not easily performed from memory, divide review into several categories.

- Recent review (2 or 3 most recent pieces)
- Easy review (pieces that your child can play from memory with no hesitation)
- Rusty/dusty review (pieces that your child cannot play from memory easily)

Make a schedule and keep track of the review rotation. Work through a few rusty pieces each day to relearn notes and bowings and use the "easy" review pieces as time for learning and polishing the lesson point. Practice is more fun, if everything is not about notes and bowings.

#3. Tonalization

The purpose of tonalization is to develop tone. Whatever vehicle your teacher chooses is fine—scales, portions of a repertoire piece, or tonalization exercises, but your child must practice the development of tone every day. Do not skip this!

#4. Preview & Preparation

Previews are usually short excerpts or exercises that prepare a new piece or technique. Choose a specific number of repetitions and play them well that many times each day. Keep track of the odds. If you practice something incorrectly five times and then correctly five times the odds are 50/50 you will miss the next time. It is human nature to make a mistake, fix it and go on, but again there is a 50% chance that the error will occur again. Do many more correct repetitions than incorrect in order to learn quickly and efficiently.

#5. New Piece

New pieces are often the favorite part of practice, but if children haven't listened enough so the music is in their mind, or they haven't reviewed so that their previous repertoire can be easily played or if they haven't prepared the preview spots, they may become frustrated. The new material might be a challenge, but it should not be hard. So ... back to #1, #2, #3 and #4.

Creative Practice

Once you have established a practice routine and practice patterns, begin to experiment. Look for creative ways to make practice interesting, challenging and fun. Try to remember we "play" the violin, we don't "work" the violin. Choose a creative practice idea and use it for a few days. Tap into your child's personality and your own.

Change the practice environment.

- Change direction your child usually faces as they play.
- Change practice place and move to a different room in your house.
- Change venues completely.
 - The empty church sanctuary after services
 - The stairway at the school where lessons are held
 - The bathroom with its great acoustics
 - The porch or the patio
- Practice by candlelight or in the dark.

Change visual or aural focus.

- Practice watching in a mirror.
- Watch! "Watch me. Watch the bow. Watch your fingers."
- Close your eyes and listen.
- Practice left hand finger motions and no bow.
- Practice with the bow and no fingers.
- Practice "inside" your brain at one signal and practice "outside" on another signal.

Play with someone else or something else.

- Play with the metronome.
- Play with the accompaniment tape.
- Play with SmartMusic accompaniment on the computer.
- Play with a pianist.
- Invite a Suzuki friend over and practice and play together.

Change how a well know piece is played.

- Change the style of a piece.
 - "Play a slow easy piece quickly with short bows."
- Change the tempo.
 - "Play a fast piece slowly and a slow piece quickly."
- Change the mood of a piece.
 - "Play Allegro in a grumpy fashion.... Now try it in a dreamy way."

Add a technical challenge.

- Play a major piece in minor key.
- Play all the bowings backwards.
- Play an easy piece in a different position. -Play all down bows at the frog.

Practice with a recording device; a tape recorder, computer or video camera.

- Watch and/or listen for feedback.
- Choose a single point and film in close-up.
- Make a tape for a purpose: a gift for grandma tape, an annual birthday recording, a graduation or recital tape.
- Make a tape for fun.

Change who is in charge.

- Put all the practice tasks in a basket and let child choose,
- Let your child see the practice list and have them choose the playing order.
- Let your child choose a practice point, let them evaluate and decide what to do next. -Ask your child to teach you a point or piece.

Don't watch their practice: listen.

- Close your eyes
 - Listen for the correct bowing, lifts and slurs!
 - Try to recognize your child's tone in a group.
 - Raise your hand if your child's bow moves away from the bridge.

Don't say a word.

- Use props, hand signals, facial expressions etc. to give your child feedback.

Play games, all sorts.

- Counting games
 - Abacus Counts: Slide beads back and forth to keep count.
 - Lego stacks: Stack a Lego for each repetition. Keep the stack growing.
 - 10 pennies or candies on the counter....
 - If you do the spot well, you get one. If you miss, I get one.
 - Play until you have all the pennies.

-Guessing games

- Can you guess it? Can you play it?
 - "I am thinking of a piece that starts on up bow E."
 - "I am thinking of a piece written by a man named Johannes."
 - "I am thinking of a piece that was Dr. Suzuki's favorite in Book Five."

-Challenge games

- Game of 20. If you play a repetition correctly you get a point. If you miss you lose a point. Play until 20.
- Seven up. Try to do 7 perfect shifts or any other technical practice point. If you miss one add 7 more. 7 correct repetitions for each miss.

Play a concert for someone else.

- Arrange a concert for someone else, grandma, the neighbors.
- Invite an older child who plays the instrument to practice with your child.
- If your baby-sitter plays, ask if they can include a practice session as part of an evening.
- Arrange a short concert for your child's class at school.

Practicing every day with your child is a huge commitment. It can be delightful, challenging, frustrating and incredibly rewarding. If it doesn't go well, forgive everyone involved, especially yourself. Give everyone a hug and try again tomorrow. You are the help that makes Suzuki learning consistent, easier, more thorough and hopefully more fun. You are what makes Suzuki education truly special. I have never had an adult say to me, "I am sorry my parents helped me learn to play an instrument." ☺

Winifred Crock is the orchestra director at Parkway Central High School. She also maintains a private violin studio in suburban St. Louis, MO. Winifred holds music degrees from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and Kent State University. She also graduated from the Suzuki Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan and earned Kodaly Certification from the Kodaly Center of America in Boston. Winifred has received the Parkway School District Pillar of Parkway Award, the St. Louis Suburban Music Educators' Merit Award, the Missouri ASTA Studio Teacher of the Year Award and was selected for the 1998 "USA Today" National Teacher Team. Winifred began teaching privately 25 years ago and in the public schools 18 years ago.