

Top 10 Practical Practice Tips

by Grace Morrison

1) Establish a regular routine

- We are creatures of habit! Nothing is more effective in achieving productive practice sessions than getting into the habit of a specific, routine practice time. It's very important to have a discussion with your child about when this time should be so they feel they've "had a say" in the decision and don't feel forced into anything. This should reduce arguments when it comes time to practice because you are now working together with your child as a team and can use reinforcing statements like, "this is the time we talked about, remember?"

2) Choose a time away from outside homework

- Though music takes study and discipline, it is first and foremost meant to be enjoyable. Choosing to practice during a time unrelated to regular homework (like before school) helps keep the mindset that this is something they're learning for fun, and not another chore.

3) Flashcards, Flashcards, Flashcards!

- I cannot stress this enough. This is the KEY to enjoyable and successful practice! If you are fighting with your child about practicing, it is most likely because they feel frustrated and unprepared. Trying to learn a new song without having a confident knowledge of the notes or rhythm is like trying to read a novel without knowing the alphabet. Doing flashcard games is the *most important* part of your practice time. If your child is confident in note *and* rhythm flashcards, they will have a much firmer grasp on how to play and new pieces will be significantly easier. Set your children up for success, and practice those flashcards!

4) Reinforce it immediately

- Many times, students count their lesson days as one of the two days they don't have to practice. Wrong! The day of your lesson is the most important day to practice! After your lesson, go home and reinforce the new lesson by having a practice time immediately before you go to bed. You will be amazed at what a huge impact it will have on how much you remember throughout the week, and make practicing the new material *much* easier.

5) Don't use practice time as discipline

- A common mistake parents make is to make their child sit at the piano until they "practice right!" If your child is doddling at the piano, to a point it's ok to let them. Again, the key is that they're enjoying themselves. If this turns into a habit however, remind them that they may play around for as long as they'd like, but eventually they will have to practice the assignment as well. Games and rewards systems work well to motivate students like this to focus on an assignment.

6) Start with what you know

- It's a good idea to start every practice session with a favorite song your child knows well. This helps boost their confidence and makes them realize they can learn anything they set their mind to, because that song was once a challenge too! It also reinforces the mindset that piano is a time when they get to have fun *and* learn at the same time.

7) Communicate with your teacher

- Your teacher is your best advocate! We want to know if you're having difficulty, whether it's with a specific song or simply getting into a productive practice routine. Chances are, if you've hit a road block on a certain part of a song, you are not alone in your class and your teacher will almost always have an extra word of advice to help. Emailing the teacher on a regular basis helps the entire learning process because we can only best educate your child when we know specifically what your needs are.

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8) Pay attention during class (parents)

- As much as possible, you should encourage your student to practice on his or her own. However, especially at the beginning level, there will be times when they come to a spot that seems impossible and they will rely on you to help. Both of you will feel better if you understand the new lesson and are able to help them during those "panic" moments.

9) Live by the Rule of 3

- It's human nature to focus on the beautiful part of a song we can play smoothly, and skip over the portion we really need to practice. For measures that want to "stump" you, break them down to smaller steps. Using the Rule of 3 means to play each hand separately three times in a row correctly, and then put it hands together three times. This seems like common sense, but the trick is to play them correctly 3 times *consecutively*, which shows that your mind has truly grasped the concept and you'll have a better chance of playing it right when putting it all together.

10) Don't get stuck in a rut

- Routine is essential, but be careful not to get so habitual in your practice session that your time at the keyboard becomes predictable and boring. Begin with your favorite piece every time you practice, but when it comes to your actual assignment it's a good idea to switch the order in which you practice and the way you practice them to keep things interesting. Our brains are excellent pattern-creating devices. Major creativity can happen when we deliberately break out of our normal patterns and try something new!