

Creating an optimal practice environment for your child

From the Liz Leehey Clarinet Studio

Set up a dedicated space for effective and efficient practice

- Remove distractions that affect your child's ability to focus:
An optimal practice environment is quiet - turn off TV, computer, cell phone, etc.
Siblings (or parents) doing other activities in the practice area while a student is practicing is distracting - dedicate the space to practice during practice time.
Some students feel self-conscious when a parent is listening to them practice. If that is the case with your child, listen from another room.
- Have all supplies ready in the practice room:
Instrument and music
Music stand and proper chair (discuss specifics with the teacher)
Proper lighting and room temperature
Metronome, pencil, reeds, cork grease, swab and other items specific to the instrument
Having all supplies ready in the practice area will help avoid procrastination and interruptions during practicing. (I recommend keeping all supplies together in a tote bag that can be easily picked up and brought to lessons.)
Setting up a "special place" for practice indicates the value of practice and the value of music making in general.

Establish a regular and consistent practice routine

- Note the time of day that your child is at his/her best:
Effective practice takes physical, mental and emotional energy. When a child is tired, practice can become frustrating and unproductive. Experiment with varying the practice time - morning before school, right after school, or evening and see what works best for your child.
- Remind your child to practice:
Children need to be reminded to practice daily. Make the practice commitment as important as other commitments. Have your child keep their own written weekly schedule of activities and include practice time in the schedule. Consistency is key to progress. As your child's skills improve, so will their self-esteem and self-motivation.
- Aim for quality, not quantity of practice:
The amount of time for each practice session depends on a number of factors including age, level of ability and musical goals. A short focused practice session is more effective than a longer un-focused session. Some students need to take short breaks during practice (getting up and moving around) to regain focus. A short practice session is better than no practice session. However, students auditioning for district/state bands or other competitions are going to have to work harder to be successful.

Encourage and Motivate

- Encourage your child by noting improvements, even the small ones:
Progress usually does not happen on a steady incline. More often, a student progresses through a series of peaks and plateaus.
Parent do not need to supervise each practice session. Instead, review the current assignment with your child shortly after the lesson. At the end of the practice week, ask you child to play for you - praise the “good music” you hear from your child and leave the “critiquing” to the teacher.
- Motivate your child by listening to music together:
Ask the teacher for guidance in selecting music to listen to - recordings of specific performers playing pieces that the child is currently working on or aspires to learn someday. Take your family to a live professional performance or even a advanced student ensemble performance. Encourage your child to listen to other children play - at student recitals or informal musical gathering. With the teacher’s guidance, explore possibilities of auditioning for community ensembles and competitions.

Communicate with the teacher

- Keep your child’s teacher informed of any situations that have affected practicing during the week.
Occasionally things happen that get in the way of practice time - family emergencies, illnesses, braces, etc. It’s best to address any issues at the beginning of the lesson, so that the teacher is able to adjust expectations and structure the lesson in an appropriate and effective manner.

Additional thoughts

An experienced teacher will be teaching your child *how to practice* in addition to teaching your child *how to play the instrument*. Most importantly, an experienced and dedicated teacher will be teaching your child *how to play music*.
A discussion of *how to practice* will be detailed in a subsequent article.