

7 WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF MUSIC LESSONS

These guidelines will help you to have a successful, rewarding experience learning an instrument. These are practical tips that we have discovered from years of teaching and our experiences with teaching hundreds of students each year.

1. HOW YOUNG IS TOO YOUNG - STARTING AT THE RIGHT AGE

Adults can start any instrument at any time. Their success is based on how willing an adult is to commit to practicing. We teach many beginner students in their 60's and 70's.

For children, starting at the right age is a key element to the success of their lessons. Some people will tell you "the sooner the better" but this attitude can actually backfire and be a negative. If a child is put into lessons too soon they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated and want to stop lessons. The last thing you want to do is turn a child off to music just because they had one unpleasant experience which could have been prevented. Sometimes if the child waits a year to start lessons their progress can be much faster. Children who are older than the suggested earliest starting age usually do very well. The following are guidelines we have found to be successful in determining how young a child can start taking music lessons.

0-4 Years Old [T] [SEP]

If you want to give your infant, toddler, or pre-schooler a fun but sound foundation in music, enroll your child in an early childhood music program with a creative, play-oriented approach to teaching. Our Music Fun Time classes (an internationally renowned curriculum – see musicfuntime.org for more information) teach the basics of music in a fun, age-appropriate way with lots of movement, listening, and singing. These classes will also introduce young music students to the basics of piano-playing and prepare them for private lessons in an age appropriate instrument.

Piano/Keyboard [T] [SEP]

At our school 3.5 years old is the youngest age that we start children in private pre-piano (Music Fun Time) or piano lessons. Many children at this age benefit from pre-piano lessons, a game-oriented and fun approach, full of varied activities designed to stimulate the interest of the child and provide a comprehensive introduction to piano-playing. Traditional piano lessons, normally beginning at age 5, are appropriate for kids who have begun to develop longer attention spans and can retain material with ease.

Guitar - Acoustic, Electric and Bass [T] [SEP]

6 years old is the earliest we recommend for guitar lessons. Guitar playing requires a fair amount of pressure on the fingertips from pressing on the strings. Children under 8 generally have small hands and require a smaller size guitar. Bass guitar students generally are 10 years old and older.

Voice Lessons

10 years old is recommended as the youngest age for private vocal lessons. Due to the physical nature of voice lessons (proper breathing techniques, development of the vocal chords and lung capacity), the younger body is generally not yet ready for the rigors of vocal technique. Students between the ages of 5 and 9 interested in developing vocal skills should enroll in our Children's Choir, which also features numerous community performance opportunities in partnership with the City of Irvine and the Chamber of Commerce.

Violin

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We accept violin students from the age of 5. Some teachers will start children as young as 3, but experience has shown us the most productive learning occurs when the beginner is 5 or older. Students before the age of 5 who are interested in violin should be enrolled in our pre-piano and music and movement class. In this way, they will develop the listening and motor skills and foundation in musicianship that will facilitate learning the violin.

Drums

The average age of our youngest drum student is 8. This varies greatly depending on the size of the child. They have to be able to reach both the pedals and the cymbals.

Flute, Clarinet, and Saxophone

Due to lung capacity (and in the case of the saxophone, the size of the instrument), we recommend that most woodwind beginners are 9 and older.

2. CHOOSE A SCHOOL WHICH OFFERS A CHOICE OF GROUP OF INDIVIDUAL LESSONS FOR BEGINNERS

Our private and group instruction options reflect the fact that different students require different teaching approaches. Some students progress best with the peer interaction and class motivation of a group session. Other students prefer the focused concentration of an individual one on one lesson. Once a student is more advanced it will be necessary to take private lessons to master the advanced techniques of an instrument or voice with individual attention. Make sure that your student has the option to select the learning style that is best suited for them.

3. CHOOSE A SCHOOL WHICH OFFERS A CHOICE OF TEACHERS, INSTRUMENTS, AND MUSICAL STYLES (CLASSICAL, JAZZ, POP, ETC)

The right teacher may be wrong for a particular student; choosing the right teacher for you or your child can make or break a musical education. A variety of teachers on our faculty makes it possible to place a student with an instructor who best fits his or her needs, background, and temperament. The possibility of switching instructors over long-term study also creates an invaluable opportunity to gain a wealth of knowledge through a variety of instruction. Moreover, as a student develops musically, he or she may become interested in a second instrument or musical genre, say from piano to guitar, or Classical to Jazz; the Irvine School of Music provides one location and high standards for the study of a variety of musical styles and instruments.

4. TAKE LESSONS IN A PROFESSIONAL TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

Learning music is not just a matter of having a qualified teacher, but also having an environment that is focused on music education. In a professional school environment a student cannot be distracted by t.v., pets, ringing phones, siblings or anything else. With only 1/2 to one hour of lesson time per week, a professional school environment can produce better results since the only focus at that time is learning music. Students in a school environment are also motivated by hearing peers who are at different levels and by being exposed to a variety of musical instruments. In a music school, the lessons are not just a hobby or sideline for the teacher but a responsibility which is taken very seriously.

5. MAKE PRACTICING EASIER

As with anything, improving in music takes practice. One of the main problems with music lessons is

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the drudgery of practicing and the fight between parents and students to practice every day. Here are some ways to make practicing easier. (Please note, for children 3-5 years old, practicing is a much more creative and less structured process than listed below; please consult your pre-piano and music and movement teacher for ideas about practicing for this age group.)

- **Time** Just as math class may be third period, it's important to set the same time every day to practice so it becomes part of a routine or habit. This works particularly well for children. Generally the earlier in the day the practicing can occur, the less reminding is required by parents to get the child to practice. We recommend practicing 5 days a week as 7 days a week can be overwhelming for a child, leading to stress or frustration which may cause the child to resent practicing and give up playing the instrument altogether.
- **Goal-Oriented Repetition** We use this method quite often when setting practice schedules for beginners. For a young child 20 or 30 minutes seems like an eternity. Instead of setting a time frame, we use a combination of goal-oriented practicing and repetition. For example, practice this section while counting the rhythm 4 times every day, and this scale with the correct arm movement 5 times a day. The child then does not pay attention to the amount of time they are practicing their instrument, but instead, is engaged in developing and reinforcing a fundamental skill that will take them to the next place in their technique or musicianship.
- **Monitor practicing** Keeping track of practicing between lessons is essential so both the student and teacher monitor progress. At the Irvine School of Music, we provide a unique practice plan to help students stay on top of all areas of their weekly practice.
- **... But do not sit next to your child and micromanage his or her practicing** Some help from parents is good, but it is more important a student build an independent, healthy practicing habit. Students will feel more ambitious and better understand concepts when they take ownership of their work. While we discourage micromanagement, we do encourage parents to check a student has completed his or her assigned practicing in the practice journal and to offer small incentives.
- **Rewards** This works very well for both children and adult students. Some adults reward themselves with a cappuccino after a successful week of practicing. Parents can encourage children to practice by granting them occasional rewards for successful practicing. In our school we reward young children for a successful week of practicing with stars and stickers on their work. Praise tends to be the most coveted award - there just is no substitute for a pat on the back for a job well done. Sometimes we all have a week with little practicing, in that case there is always next week.

6. USE RECOGNIZED TEACHING MATERIALS

There are some excellent materials developed by professional music educators that are made for students in a variety of situations. For example in piano, there are books for very young beginners, and books for adult students with famous classical, popular, and folk tunes. There are books that can start you at a level you are comfortable with. These materials have been researched and are continually

upgraded and improved to make learning easier. These materials ensure that no important part of learning the instrument can inadvertently be left out. If you ever have to move to a different part of the country, qualified teachers and institutions will recognize the materials and be able to smoothly continue from where the previous teacher left off.

7. PERFORMANCE OPPORTUNITIES

The experience of performing in front of a live audience is a great way to build confidence and motivate the student to keep striving for higher levels of musicianship. We encourage even a beginning student with only a few months of training to play simple songs at recitals and workshops. At the same time, it is true that some students have absolutely no desire to perform in front of an audience. They just want to play for their own enjoyment as a hobby. Make sure you choose a school that has "optional" rather than mandatory recitals and performances.

Most Importantly . . . HAVE FUN!!

Music should be something that you enjoy for a lifetime. So, try not to put unrealistic expectations on yourself or your children to learn too quickly. Instead, it's important to view the learning of music as a coveted opportunity. Everyone learns at a different pace and the key is to be able to enjoy the journey.