

CLEARING THE PATH FOR PRACTICE

By John R. Stevenson, DJD

For the past 11 years now, the pattern has not changed. It is fall, school has begun, and the middle and high school children are in crisis. They are disillusioned and frustrated due to the overwhelming effects of homework, (a lot of homework), soccer, band, orchestra, and a myriad of other activities besides sleeping, eating, and just being 11, 12, or 16. Is there any wonder why they reach *critical mass*? As parents we want the best for our children, we want them to "get ahead" we want them to excel. It is a difficult world and they must be prepared to compete, ready to achieve and able to succeed. As teachers, we want the children to learn every thing they can; they must pass the exams, excel on the SAT's, and eventually get into Harvard. I am not exaggerating the problem is real. It seems that free time is no longer an option, and in addition to all of this, the child wants to take piano lessons, which by their very nature involve practice time and from a teacher who demands only the very best. What is the solution?

Having taught for 37 years at all levels of the educational spectrum from pre-school through post-doctorate degrees and having raised four children, I know the problems. Therefore, I have set down a few words of what I hope is helpful advise to the parent and children that may help them to see a clearer path toward a solution. No child can do everything, but allowing them to have time to learn something about a musical instrument and how to use the instrument to express thoughts and emotions hidden deep within I find essential to their psychological development. I have broken down the problem into four categories: Make Choices, Budget Your Time, Be Consistent, and Learn When to Be Flexible.

MAKE CHOICES

Children need to learn to make choices and to make them without regret. It is always difficult but learning to make choices teaches children to honor themselves while honoring others. I often suggest looking at three valuable components necessary for mental health: nurture, nature, and love. Parents should ask themselves these three

questions: Where can my child learn most about him or herself (nature)? Where can my child find unconditional acceptance (love) and, where will he or she receive the best possible fostering (nurture)?

I use these same three questions in choosing any activity for myself. What can be more rewarding than to receive unconditional acceptance, love, and care? Teachers, group leaders and advisors who have chosen to be nurturers will always be more effective. Time spent with them is never a waist no matter what the activity. (See *Understanding the Role of the Transformational Teacher* by John R. Stevenson, DJD)

BUDGETING YOUR TIME

(See *Practice Techniques 101* by John R. Stevenson for additional information.) Create a realistic schedule and then allocate the appropriate time for practice. Small amounts of practice every day is far more beneficial than a large amount twice a week. In order to developed all the necessary physical and mental skills it is important to develop a consistent practice routine. For beginners, one or two ten-minute sessions every day are ideal. As the student matures, the number of sessions should move up to three per day and eventually expanding each session to fifteen then twenty and finally thirty minutes. Spread the sessions out through the day: one before school is ideal if you can do it. Another could be included just after school, before homework and after a small snack. The final session should be either just before or just after dinner. Do not wait for the practice to be the last activity before bed. It will only prove to be a waist of the child's time and energy. Devote the time before bed to reading books or similar activates so that the central nervous system calms down and prepares the body for a good sound sleep.

I often advise my middle and high school students to take one day off as long as it is not the day of their lesson. Everyone needs a day to sleep in or do something different from the routine. It is a good idea to include a "day off" into the child's general schedule as well. Everyone looks forward to his or her "day off."

BE CONSISTENT

After having made the choices and creating the schedule it is time to commit. This part proves to challenge the parents the most because they must remain consistent and steadfast. Here is where the adult must insist that everyone follow the plan.

Remaining firm in the commitment provides security for the child and the parent alike. A regular routine creates a rhythm in the life of the family and a good rhythm cycle through the day and the week will help reduce stress among the family members.

Please keep in mind that the student is not the adult. All children "hate" to going to bed, brushing their teeth, getting up in the morning and yes, all children "hate" to practice. It is the adult's responsibility to remind the child and to be firm and insist. Most children do not go to the piano willingly. Once on the bench however, they do well and actually learn that they do enjoy it.

LEARN TO BE FLEXIBLE

Having discussed consistency, one must remember that things do go haywire from time to time. Any number of unavoidable incidents and/or opportunities comes along through the week that will force a family to abandon the regular schedule. However, this is life and everyone must learn to roll with the punches. Life must, and it usually does go on. In other words, do not allow the schedule and the regular routine to become so important that it takes precedence over good common sense. If the schedule is broken and the child was unable to fulfill the normal practice requirement simply let the teacher know. Remind the child to share any problems that they may have had with their practice over the past week so that the teacher may react appropriately.

Over the years, I have learned to ask my students if anything happened over the past week to prevent their normal practice before the lesson begins. If they are honest, it helps me decide exactly what type of help they will need in the lesson. They quickly learn to be honest however, since I am always able to describe exactly how they practiced and how much time they practiced by hearing their performance. I insist that I am "old" and that I have experience, but they continue to be amazed by my accuracy. I tell them: "I can hear a student play once and I know how they practice." It comes with time.