

The Top Five Ways to Motivate Your Kids To Practice

Edward Obermueller

Practice Motivator #1

Why do kids resist practicing?

How often have you set a New Year's Resolution to lose weight or exercise, and you toughed it out for a few days or maybe a few weeks, and then you crashed? And then you beat yourself up. And then the next time it is time to do the activity, you have negative associations. "I tried, and it was too hard, and I couldn't do it."

Do More Than None

It's the same with practicing. We often over-regiment ourselves and our kids, in a well-intentioned effort to work hard, achieve, or to become good at something. As parents we want the best for our kids, we want them to do well. As violinists we can become perfectionist and try to climb mountains on pure will power and grit. But **that can lead quickly to burn out**, or for parents, arguing and cajoling about practice time.

The reason kids argue and cajole is that they are feeling what they imagine is negative pressure. This can cause them to go into all kinds of avoidance strategies. (None of us adults do that, ahem, Facebook.) When we think we have to put in many hours at something, it seems too hard.

For a young child, simply the idea of "a long time" is enough to be very demotivating.

You can release that pressure by allowing them a "Do More Than None" approach.

Instead of ramping up our willpower, feeling negative pressure, or berating our kids, it is helpful to say to ourselves that we have to do...**more than none!** You'll surprise yourself at how much more often you are willing to return to practicing with this attitude.

Often the hardest part of any task is getting started. If you can supply the energy to usher yourself and your child into the practice room, the rest often goes forward on its own momentum.

I often put it this way: **"Let's just get out the violin and say Hi. It misses you."** Find ways of communicating permission for the "more than none" attitude and it will pay dividends in the amount of practicing that gets done.

TRY THIS

Set a timer for 10 minutes.

Practice until the timer goes off. If you feel too tired to go on, then allow yourself to stop. Come back tomorrow and do the same thing.

If you feel good, set the timer for another 10 minutes.

Start with a goal of 10 minutes per day and add a minute each week, until you get to 20. (For 3-5 year olds this might even be 5 minutes. For ages 6-8, don't go beyond 10 minutes until they are ready, both in terms of physical development and mental attention span. Ages 9 and above can handle 20 minutes, but when motivation is the issue, always default to 10 minutes.)

(HINT: Suzuki pieces are perfect for a 10-minute practice session, since they are short!)

REMEMBER: Give yourself and your child permission to DO MORE THAN NONE. And be willing to reward yourself and your child for showing up to practice at all. (See Practice Motivator #4.)

Practice Motivator #2

Here are some very common statements I hear from students and parents:

I forgot to practice this week.

We had such a busy week, it was really hard to find the time.

I had [fill in sport or activity here] and just couldn't practice.

If you have ever felt this way (and I know I have as a busy parent of four boys!), here is something to take to heart:

Listening Counts!

During the busy weeks, *listening* is the best thing you can do. And it's so easy!

Why does it count? Because it is training your ear, and your mind, in the melody and rhythm of the pieces you want to learn.

It works at the subconscious level: your brain lays track for the music while you consciously pay attention to something else. But you can also pay close attention to the music as you listen, or follow along with the written notes. Combining the two--subconscious and conscious--listening methods will turbocharge your playing ability.

Take it from Yo Yo Ma, who listens to a new piece he wants to learn about 100 times before ever playing the first note.

TRY THIS

Put in the CD or play from your iTunes, the appropriate Suzuki Book, or a recording of the piece you want to learn.

- Play it while reading
- Play it in the car (put commuting time to good use)
- Play it during homework time (great for background music)
- Play it while preparing dinner
- Play it as a "timer" for an activity (Book One is about 15 minutes long, perfect for a session of reading or tidying up a bedroom.)
- Play it with music on the stand or in your lap and follow along

Keep it easy and simple. Add practice time back into the week by listening. Almost magically your playing will improve!

Practice Motivator #3

Many parents worry about how to practice with their child. They worry particularly that they aren't doing and saying the right things.

If you find yourself in this position, it is helpful to take a step back. Realize that the heart of your role as the practice parent is to provide your presence.

Be Present (In a Way That Fits)

Think of practicing as watching a flower bloom. You can't force it. Yes, it needs water, and perhaps a trimming from time to time. But other than that, you just stand back and enjoy it.

This can be extremely hard to do! Especially for us type-A personalities. We want to cut to the chase, to identify problems efficiently and solve them (because there are SO MANY MORE problems waiting for us after this practice session!) and we think that we are being helpful by actively trying to do things, and to fix whatever is going on.

Presence is hard to define. It is the art of being. It has to do with awareness, attentiveness, and physically being around when your child is practicing (though not necessarily in the child's space.) It is giving the child enough attention for them to know what they are doing matters, and that you care enough to listen to it and provide feedback.

TRY THIS

- Be nearby. Even if you have to multi-task (how can we survive as parents without multi-tasking?) in the next room sending an email, doing dishes, or paying bills, you can "send in" a comment from time to time, such as "that's sounding great!" or "keep going!"
- If the child is upset or frustrated, just ask curiously about what it is that is bothering them. Resist the urge to state what you think it is. Let them discover it on their own.
- Ask yourself, at what time of day am I most able to be present? That is, to have my heart and mind available to my child during his or her practicing?
- Let the way you are present be in a way that fits your child. If he or she wants you right there in the practice room, do that. But often you'll find that children do not want that level of "hovering" over their practicing. Again, being nearby may be just the thing needed in that case.

Presence is about the heart. Where your heart is, there will your presence be.

Let yourself enjoy being in the presence of your child, and your child's practicing, and it will truly flower.

Practice Motivator #4

Should I correct him?

What if she does it wrong?

When I know he's playing out of tune, what should I do?

What do I do when I try to give constructive criticism, but she just argues or pushes back?

If you are experiencing resistance from your child over your involvement in practice, it may be because your child is perceiving it as criticism. This can create a "negative feedback loop" where the child begins behaving in a way that he or she knows will distract you. It might involve arguing, acting lazy, running around, or becoming overly chatty. You then double down on the "pay attention!" verbiage, or trying to "enforce" the continuation of the practicing in some way. But then things get worse as the child gets upset and soon is unable to practice or learn.

Err On The Side Of Affirmation

Understand: When our children act lazy, silly, tired, or argumentative, it is merely an avoidance strategy. Kids will resort to these tactics when they feel incompetent and don't know how to express that verbally. What they need most at that moment is affirmation, not critique.

Think about it. If you had someone nit-picking your every action at work (maybe you do!) would you perform at your best? Imagine while cooking a meal, you were interrupted every couple of minutes by someone standing over your shoulder saying, "No, not this way, THAT way" or "You're not doing that right." It would not only be inefficient, but you would be discouraged from continuing to be involved with it on a daily basis.

When this kind of negative feedback occurs, remember to err on the side of affirmation. Leave the critique to the teacher, at the next lesson. You and your child will both be much happier for it, and you'll be surprised at how many problems you thought you needed to fix, end up ironing themselves out.

TRY THIS

- **Focus on being present** rather than on “fixing” things. (see Practice Motivator #3)
- **Ask curious questions.** Instead of making critical statements, focus on finding a question to ask about their playing, one that is open ended and allows them to process what is happening on their own. Some good questions to start with:
 - What are you feeling right now?
 - What do you think is going on right now?
 - Do you think we can ask your teacher about that next time?
 - What in particular is making you happy/impatient/excited/frustrated?
 - Can you play it one more time for me?
 - Do you like anything about this music or this piece? What specifically?
- **Go away from the practice area.** Sometimes your child is merely seeking space. Do this especially if you find yourself unable to stop focusing on what is wrong.
- **Gently suggest that the child listen to the piece again** (especially if there is a persistent error that the child seems not to want to acknowledge). Rather than arguing, listening together is a great way to solve a disagreement. (See Practice Motivator #2)
- **Reward the practicing.** Kids need tangible, concrete evidence of good behavior. Keep tallies on a chart, use stickers, and the occasional treat. Reward the fact that practicing happened even if it did not go well.
- **Find 5 good things.** See if you can think of 5 affirming things to say about the way the child is playing at that moment. Help your child by asking her to do the same. This will help her reframe her frustration and regain motivation.

REMEMBER: We don't live in a world of affirmation. As adults we are surrounded by very negatively-critical thinking patterns. Therefore this is may be a hard habit to break. Children can start very early picking up anxiety and perfectionism from trying to “be the best.”

In this context children can easily begin to view music as something to *survive*. The goal becomes “get to the end of the piece” rather than enjoyment and sharing musical expression. That's not a very nourishing state of mind.

You do your children a great service in life if you can help them to love and affirm themselves in their efforts, in all the small ways they succeed. When you err on the side of affirmation you will cultivate a more generous heart in your child, and in yourself. You'll hear that come out in the music, and more importantly, you'll see it positively influencing every area of your life.

Practice Motivator #5

Have you ever reached a point when you just can't seem to make any progress?

When things don't seem to want to come together, we start to get frustrated, discouraged, maybe even anxious.

"I'll never get it right," we hear that inner voice say. We can start to spiral into a negative emotional field.

If you have heard that voice, you can relate to your child when she stumbles repeatedly over a difficult passage or a new technique. Doubling down and "trying harder" often makes things worse.

Stop and Breathe

Stop practicing. Put down the violin. With your child, go away from the practice area, and do the following 2-minute exercise.

Stand up.

Take a deep breath, pulling the breath in through your nose, and all the way down into your belly. Place your hands below your belly button, and feel your belly expand on the inhale.

Take a few deep inhales and exhales. Enjoy the feeling. This is your own personal treasure, your own space and time. Revel in it, enjoy it.

Try this now so you can see how good it feels!

** Watch your child's shoulders. They should stay level. Only the hands should move in and out. If his chest is rising, he is breathing too high. This causes more feeling of anxiety and stress. We want to calm that feeling, so we want to move the breath downward. This is hard to learn at first, but after a few tries, it usually catches on.

On the inhale, picture the color blue. Picture it filling every area of tension, tightness, soreness. Picture it filling every emotional area of stress, frustration, exhaustion, worry or anxiety.

On the exhale, picture the color red. Picture it "catching" all the sore, angry, irritated areas of your body and mind on the way out. Feel it emptying your muscles of the tightness and stiffness.

If you know a yoga pose or two, you can combine this exercise with that. But don't make it more than a few minutes.

Then go back to the practice area.

As you prepare to play, breathe in. On the down bow, breathe out. Let the new, expansive, relaxed breath permeate what you are doing. Breathe into the sound, breathe into the notes.

Note the difference this made in the section you were practicing. It may not be perfect yet, but you'll be amazed at how much better you sound. Remember to repeat this multiple times if the section you are working on is particularly difficult or long.

Finally, let go. When we breathe deeply, it is important to let go. Do this at night too, when you are falling asleep. That way the next day's practice will be even better, as the mind assimilates what you've learned today.

Share your feedback

Let me know how it goes with trying these methods.

If you have a story to share about practice motivation, please share it.

I would love to hear from you!

Send me a note at Edward@BestViolinLesson.com

Post a picture of a practicing accomplishment at [Edward's Violin Studio](#) Facebook page.