

AT HOME PRACTICE

By James Butler

The better your child plays the more confident he will become on the instrument, the more he - and you - will enjoy the violin and the music. The only way to become better is to practice. The only effective way to practice is to have regular daily sessions with a basic structure.

There are five basic elements which should be included in each day's practice:

1. Warm-up or tonalization - choose from any of the games or exercises from box class, lessons or groups;
2. Polishing current material - from lesson notes;
3. Preparing for new material - from lesson notes;
4. Reviewing familiar material - from lesson notes;
5. Reinforcing good playing posture and habits see 'Study Points'

Try to have a practice session every day. If a full session is not feasible, include at least the warm-up and review segments. Remember -- seven days a week is better than six, six is better than five -- less than five days of practice a week will result in a noticeable slowing of your child's progress.

Try to establish a regular practice time when both you and your child are rested and at your best. Most children respond well when a regular routine can be followed,

The length of each practice session should always be related to the attention span of your child. In the beginning, try for ten to fifteen minutes a day of total practice time. For the younger child, this should be divided into two or three different sessions each day. After a few weeks you will develop a sense of the most productive length for your child and you can adapt your schedule accordingly.

Take good notes at lessons so that you will know exactly what your teacher wants you to work on that week. Use the cassette tape of the lesson to refresh your memory and to reinforce your teacher's instructions. Refer to the 'Study Points' for more specific technical and musical suggestions.

To avoid frustration work on 'key points', using small steps. Try to use non-verbal reminders rather than too many words. Look for progress in small things and reinforce your child's efforts with an abundance of praise. Encourage him to expand his talents but avoid pressuring him.

Be adventuresome! When things get dull, everyone's patience wears thin and progress seems slow. Don't be stymied. Use the games from box class, private lesson or group lessons -- ask other parents for ideas - or think up your own games and new ways to practice. If the new games are successful, be sure to share them with the teacher. Periodically, the substitution of a home concert or a review play-in will provide a welcome break in the practice routine.

DO NOT START YOUR CHILD ON A NEW PIECE before your teacher has introduced it at a lesson. There are preparatory exercises which lead to the actual work on each new piece, plus new bowings, etc.

You could cause you and your child much additional work by trying to take the lead in this area. Even if you have an older child who has studied the piece, do not take the initiative. Each student's needs are different and your teacher will decide how and when each child should move on in the repertoire

Be careful not to slip into the "from song to song" attitude. The Suzuki repertoire is carefully planned to allow the student to move from skill to skill. Material in the books has been arranged in a specific order. Each new piece includes technical points of increasing difficulty which require learning a new skill. A later piece will utilize a skill learned earlier and add a new skill or two. The student is building a solid technical foundation upon which all of his advanced playing will depend. It is important to understand this 'from skill to skill' concept from the beginning.

During home practice sessions, you should help your child work on small segments of assigned pieces and recognize that mastery of these small steps is important. What piece or book the child is playing is not important. How he has mastered the basic skills and added to them, at any level, is of major importance.