

Sustaining Beginning Parents

By Mary Cay Neal

Adapted from Parent lecture, June, 1993, Denver Suzuki Institute.

As parents and teachers of beginning students, we are all interested in the ever-present challenge of the beginning stages. I feel that I'm coming from a really good vantage point to talk about this subject because I am a teacher and the mother of three Suzuki trained violinists who are now 22, 24 and 26. That means I've been on both sides of the fence for a very long time. And the good news is that it is all worth it.

There never was any question in my mind that I was going to give the gift of music to my children. I had the determination — though it was challenged, believe me — that music, having meant so much to me, would mean something special to my three boys.

The good news is that today we are very close. Through the common bond of music, my children and I have ended up being the best of friends. No matter how turbulent it might have been while they were growing up, we ended up being friends; we get on the phone and talk about music all the time. Two of them did choose to be professional musicians and the third is a violin maker, so you know they have utilized their early environment.

It was not my purpose to make them into professionals. When I was at the stage we're discussing today, my only goal was that they would play the violin through high school. At that point they could decide what to do with it. Along the way I got challenged from time to time, "I want to quit! I'm sick of doing this!" But we negotiated that and they fell in love with what they were doing by the time they reached the high school years. So it did work out all right. I just don't want to paint it as a completely

easy task, because that would be a lie, wouldn't it? But it did work out in the end.

I also have a good vantage point as a teacher who has led many, many students from the beginning. I've been lucky because I've stayed in one place throughout my Suzuki teaching career (next year we will celebrate our 25th anniversary at Buffalo Suzuki Strings). So I have been able to watch the development of many students, from the very beginning all the way to conservatory. I have many students in conservatories, but I don't want you to think that that's the most important thing to me—it isn't. I can also tell you stories about students I had who are studying math and law in college, who are playing and soloing with their college orchestras. So the investment is worth it. However, in the beginning stages it really requires a lot of ingenuity and patience.

I decided to pose a few questions for you, trying to pick a scenario that posed the most necessary questions we must ask ourselves. I would love for you to jot down these ideas; they're going to be very simple and very quick.

Dr. Suzuki says, "Set high standards of excellence... Every child is born with the potential to attain this excellence." Even if the child is handicapped, we simply have to be sensitive to the handicap. I don't know if any of you saw the article in a recent issue of the ASJ (Vol 21, No. 1) written by the parents of a child with cerebral palsy. He's a cello student who plays absolutely beautifully, and they have figured out how to teach him the instrument. The point is that they didn't just say, "This child is handicapped,

there's no way to teach him this." They thought about what instrument he would be able to play, and now he is really successful. That's how we can approach teaching children with special challenges; we must think about how they can be successful. As Dr. Suzuki says, every child has the potential to attain excellence.

My husband has a favorite story about the first time we visited Hawaii 18 years ago. We were at the Polynesian Cultural Center, and he ran across a very old man who was demonstrating how to make a canoe. He told my husband that there is a log in every canoe, a canoe in every log. I translate that to mean that there's a Mozart Concerto in every beginner. It's up to me, and their parents to help it happen. To attain this excellence, you must believe in the child's potential ability, provide excellent instruction and provide a nurturing environment.

These three things are very simple to write down on paper but in fact are very hard to achieve in daily life. So the rest of our discussion will be, "How do we attain these, especially for the beginners? How are we going to organize ourselves, so that we can make it happen for our child, or for our student?" The following series of questions will help clarify the issues and are good questions for all of us to ask ourselves.

Am I determined to teach my child to play the _____? Have I decided that this is what I'm going to do?

A lot of parents get started without really deciding that this is what they want to do. I hear things like, "I'm not sure if he'll like it. I promise you that this is not the issue. You are definitely

the deciding factor for your child. We decide about all kinds of other things for our children, so why do we have to start apologizing when deciding on music?

Our parent association once sponsored a program with a panel discussion by teenagers for the parents. A panel of four teenagers came to say what they do with their music now that they have gotten to be fairly good at it. One of them said string quartets. Another, who now studies at the University of Chicago, said that he had done semi-professional type playing and had made money at it, and remarked that it was better than working at McDonald's. During the course of the discussion my son said, "I did not choose this instrument, but now that I can play it well I'm really glad." That is a way of assuring yourself that the decisions that we make for our children will work out just fine in the end.

Have I set aside the time in my schedule to practice with my child? Have I given up my time?

I had a mom say to me, "We're quitting because I want to drink coffee with my husband in the evenings. "That's fine: at least she was honest enough to tell me that she didn't want to practice with her kid. She was honest enough with him not to set him up for a disaster.

Am I committed to attending private and group lessons regularly?

Group lessons can be a little iffy sometimes. Maybe a soccer game conflicts and the child says, "Oh, I have to go to the soccer game, my coach will be mad at me."

In my program, I'm known as a very tough teacher but also as one who loves her students without question. I tell them, "You have a choice. You don't have to decide to be in the advanced class. You don't have to decide to be in the tour group. It is your

choice. But once you've made your choice, don't give me any excuses. Don't tell me you have a soccer game. Don't tell me the coach is going to throw you off the team. Don't tell me any of those things. I'll help you work it out. I'll give you one absence for this sequence of rehearsals. But you must also go to your coach and work it out with him." They're very reluctant to do that because they're afraid of the reprisals, especially in team sports. The best way for parents to help is to get on the phone and say, "My child has music in his life, and that's important to us." And work it out. Don't just accept it as a non-issue.

One of my sons was playing soccer in high school. He played the first year, but the second year I heard that he wasn't going to do it. So I asked him, "Honey, aren't you going to play soccer this year? And he said, "No, Mom, because the coach does not understand about music.

Set high standards of excellence.

Obviously he had thought about whether or not he could work it out, felt that he couldn't, and he decided not to do it. That was his choice.

Do I leave each private lesson knowing exactly what to practice, in the right order (the order is really important) and how to practice in a step by step manner?

If you cannot answer that question with a resounding yes, I suggest you set up a parent teacher conference and sit down without your music and with your teacher to work out a system. My students get a practice chart, which I write in a kind of shorthand. I write what their assignment is and what order it comes in. The parent should still take notes and write down how to accomplish the tasks. It seems to help my parents and children practice

because the children see that these are jobs to be done, this is not what mommy says, or daddy says, or even teacher says. And when you put checks or stickers there, they feel a sense of accomplishment. It seems to help that I've written it, even if it's really short.

This year we instituted a policy of school-wide parent-teacher conferences. The conference took the place of a normal lesson, and though a few parents were reluctant to give up their lesson time, the vast majority loved it. I encourage all of you to make a time when you can talk directly together and sort out any problems. I learned about so many things that were concerns to my parents, even those that I was very close to. Without that special time, there were things we just never got to articulate.

Do I approach each practice time feeling happy and positive about spending this time with my child?

Wow, that's a big one. I approached each practice time knowing that I owed it to my children. It wasn't their fault that I had spent the past fourteen hours in that studio. We just have to talk to ourselves, don't we?

Do I make my expectations for their practice appropriate to their age? That means length of time, number of repetitions, games, rewards, etc.

A lot of people like my system of involving the child in counting the number of repetitions. You can guide them in picking the appropriate number by asking them, "How many times do you think you can do this?" They often pick a really low number, because they think, "I can do this!" That's what you want, that can do attitude. Or sometimes they pick a really high number, and you should advise them to pick something more appropriate, maybe a number between one and twenty. I found that this worked well with my own children, because when I

heard them practicing upstairs, I could hear them repeating things over and over again.

Think about using appropriate rewards. Many people don't like to use rewards. They call them bribes. No! Rewards motivate children and can make practice more fun. Also, it's a test not to practice too long.

Do we attend concerts and listen to classical music on the radio, CDs and tapes? Do we take the children to concerts?

There are lots of free concerts listed in the paper. Go for half of a concert; if you don't pay for the ticket, you don't feel bad leaving when it's appropriate. Listening to classical music makes it important. Listening orients them to what you want them to do. And, of course, do you listen to your Suzuki tape? The last question is really important:

Do I truly believe that my child will learn to play beautifully?

When I do orientations with new parents, I ask them all these hard questions. Then I tell them I'm going to make them a 100% guarantee—that if they do what I say, their child will learn to play beautifully. I don't even apologize for sounding like some sort of dictator, because I'm taking on the responsibility too. We're going to work as a team and this child is going to play beautifully. I also give them my favorite handout; an article called The Big Payoff, written by a neurologist. It talks about how studying music develops the mind, the heart, and the body.

Questions from the audience:

Should the student be included in the conference?

Parents of elementary and preschool students came alone. Middle school students came with their parents and high school students came by

themselves. Sometimes the parents came with the high school student if they felt there was some problem. It also helps to set goals. I said to a student, "What do you want to accomplish? What do you want to accomplish by the time you graduate from high school? What pieces would you like to play?"

Did you have a regular schedule of doing them or did you just play it by ear?

We did it once near the beginning of the year at their lesson time. We scheduled a conference during first semester after we had been in session for five weeks.

When your children were starting, at a young age I presume, how many other activities did work out (in addition to) violin and school?

They were very young; my first one was almost four, the second was only two and a half, and my third wanted to play as soon as he could talk, but I made him wait until he was about three. I recommend one other activity besides music study, preferably something physical. But beware of the schedules of team sports.

When you have children, say seven years old, and all their friends want to play soccer and T-ball, how do you enforce practice?

The rule in our house was always to get the practice done first and then go out to play. In the middle school and high school years, we even said practice before homework because practice takes more physical stamina and concentration.

Do you think it is wise to study two instruments?

Some of my students play piano as well as violin; in fact, my children did. It's best to start with violin. If you have already started one or the other, it is best to give the first instrument a good

start of two or three years before adding the second instrument. Also, you have to decide if you have practice time for both. I decided that piano was my children's second instrument, that they had a half-hour a day to practice piano and they would do what they could do in a half-hour. They learned to play the piano relatively well; they got to the Bach Two-part Invention and this ability has served them well. They practiced a half-hour a day, up to middle school. Then when they hit middle school—about seventh grade—we really had to stop. We realized that we could no longer even do piano lessons.

How long did your children practice violin every day?

An hour, almost from the beginning. They learned to become very efficient practicers, so as they reached high school age and very advanced levels, they still only practiced one and one-half hours each day during the week and two hours or more during the weekend. They now tell me that the secret was that they practiced every day.

How did you manage to find time to practice with your children?

I would make tapes for them and we had a notebook where the assignment was written down pretty specifically. It helped me become a very specific teacher, because I had to make a list for my children to practice from. Also, once a week I would make a tape, and I would talk to them on the tape and demonstrate on the violin a bit too. While I was teaching in the afternoon, they would practice from the tapes, in the evening, I would spend time checking up on the new material.

What can parents do on the days that they just can't practice with their child?

You can have the children work with a tape. You don't have to be with them

every minute of the practice time. A nine-year-old can do a lot of practicing by himself. He can practice with tapes, with instructions from the teacher, with examples from the teacher, or doing part of his lesson without you. Possibly, if your nine year-old has a music room at school, he could practice there. A lot of my students do that.

Did you ever think about having your children take from another teacher?

I had no choice since there wasn't anybody else in my town to do it. So we had to work together and it was great. I would tell anyone, if you could possibly teach your own children, do it. It's a really good thing, I think. It's another way of learning to get along. When mine were about 14 years old they did go to another teacher.

If you start a four year-old on the violin, at what age do you think they are ready to practice alone without getting lost?

Because you certainly don't do that when they're beginners. No, you're right, but by the time they're seven they could start to do a little practicing alone. If you have something you think they are really secure with, like maybe their Twinkle warm-ups, you can start with that. By the time they're

nine, they can do more. By the time they're eleven, they should be practicing almost by themselves, and they want to be, anyway. I would say eleven is the maximum age that parents can still practice with their children.

As a non-musician, I had my wife play the Suzuki Piano Book One solos on the tape so I could practice with my son.

That's right, it's helpful to have an example on tape. You could also ask your teacher to do that, but ask them not to put the whole song on tape, just give an example of the practice spots on tape, and talk. The children love it when you talk to them. I made an accompaniment practice tape with piano for my students. It's a slow version of Book One, and I talk to the children on the tape. Parents come back and tell me that the children like me talking to them. I say things like, "Fix your violin hold, fix your bow hold, and watch your E-string. Are you ready?"

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