

Progress Through Repetition

Dear parents, after some years of instrumental lessons your children will have learned a good number of pieces. To some parents and students, regular repetition of all pieces may now seem too laborious and complicated. Nevertheless, this area of practice should not be neglected. Regular review of high quality becomes ever more important as skill levels increase. What follows will illustrate both why review should not be neglected, as well as how to make it a fun and exciting experience.

What effect do review exercises have on children?

Children who regularly review previously learned pieces or learn new pieces and techniques through systematic repetition, gain fundamental experiences that can be applied to many areas of life. Musically their development is more advanced, and they have better command of their instrument than those who predominantly play only their current pieces. In order to illustrate some important aspects of review, try to imagine the following three scenarios:

First scenario: Think back to the time when your children made their first attempts to walk. They fell countless times, got back up, fell down again, scraped a knee and maybe cried. However, when they finally managed to walk a few steps, they would laugh with joy at their accomplishment. Untiring, they tried to walk again and again, alone or holding your hand. You remember these scenes very clearly.

Second scenario: We observe a circus performer balancing with confidence on the high wire, doing somersaults or jumping up and down. He stands smiling in the spotlight and accepts his applause. We all know how much intensive training and daily practice is required to perform such feats.

Third scenario: Imagine a beautifully well-groomed garden in full bloom. In the sunlight, under a tree, a monk sits peacefully and deeply absorbed in meditation. After a while, he stands up, picks up his bow and arrow, carefully takes aim, and hits the center of the bull's-eye.

The first scenario represents the natural need for learning and achievement found in small children, qualities that should be nurtured for life. The high-wire artist illustrates how much we can achieve when we constantly strive to improve ourselves, giving joy to others and gaining self-confidence in the process. The third scenario describes a path for inner development. Here, shooting with a bow and arrow serves as a means towards self-education. The monk isn't really interested in the handling of a bow and arrow. His objective can be found in the voluntary self-improvement revealed in his unwavering goal of perfect execution. A Zen saying clearly illustrates this principle:

What I do, I do fully; I give my best.

I do this naturally, with enterprise, joy and infinite care, playfully-serious.

Why is it necessary to introduce systematic review exercises?

- A. To learn new technical skills reliably
- B. To refine and secure already-mastered technique
- C. To elevate pieces already learned to a higher technical and musical level

What biological mechanisms take place in the brain?

Everything that is frequently repeated, be it specific movements, isolated musical passages or entire pieces, creates new connections in the brain. With every further repetition, the neurons and synapses strengthen these connections. Now the brain is able to repeat these familiar actions with much less effort until they become almost automatic.

This process always occurs in the brain, whether it is a good or a bad habit. For this reason, it is extremely important to learn things correctly the first time. The *quality* of the repetition is of utmost importance, otherwise there is the danger that mistakes will be imprinted. The relearning of an incorrectly practiced motion pattern requires at least as many repetitions as were required to learn it wrongly in the first place. (see Frederic Vester "Denken, Lernen, Vergessen")

Why should review exercises be presented in an entertaining way?

Brain research tells us that people who link practice and learning in combination with joy and a pleasant atmosphere initiate a positive hormone reaction that leads to a smooth exchange between nerve cells. The successful completion of a task results in a sense of achievement that compels the student to apply himself even more and continue the effort.

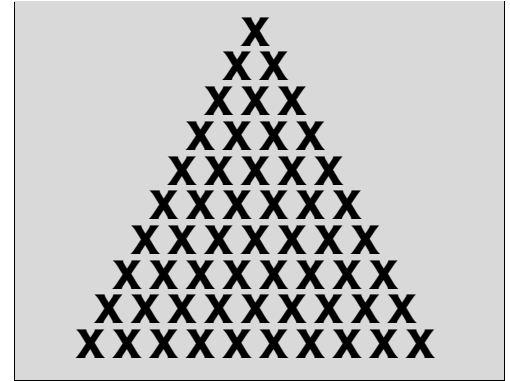
How can you present review exercises to your child in an entertaining manner?

A. Suggestions for the practice of new technical skills or short, difficult passages

The practice pyramid

The student should practice the new technique or passage extremely slowly and carefully. When you are satisfied, he should try to play the exercise two times in a row without mistakes. Did he do it well? If not, he should go through the passage one time mentally or on his "magic violin" before trying it again two times on the instrument. When this is satisfactory, he can try to play the passage three times in a row, etc.

On the right is a drawing of a practice pyramid for a child who has played a passage ten times in a row without mistakes. There are a total of fifty-five X's, a truly fantastic achievement!



The Number Game

Your child picks a number between two and nine, which represents the number of times he believes that he can play a passage or exercise without mistakes. Then, he attempts to meet this goal. Was he correct with his prediction?

The Stairway Game

If you have stairs in your house or apartment, this game is lots of fun. Your child stands on the bottom step and plays the passage or exercise to be learned one or more times (depending on the length and difficulty of the passage). If he performs it well, he can take one step up and try the exercise again. As he progresses up the steps, he will certainly become more confident and proficient.

The Stepping Stone Game

This is much like the Stairway Game, except here the child begins next to a wall and takes steps forward when he performs well. When he does very well, he can take a big step. If only a small mistake occurs, he can take a tiny step. The game is over when he has reached the other side of the room.

B. Suggestions to improve and strengthen previously learned technical skills

All the games in Section A work well also for this area.

C. Suggestions to bring previously learned pieces to a higher musical and technical standard

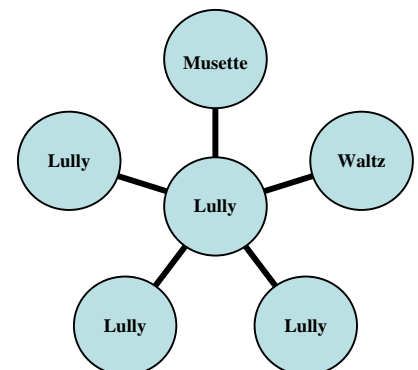
The Sticker Game

Draw circles on a piece of paper and write the name of one piece to be practiced in each circle. Now cover each circle with a reusable sticker. Your child is allowed to remove one of the stickers and discover his task.

This game has the advantage of allowing you to plan the practice content precisely.

Exercise variations for the practice of new technical skills or short, difficult passages (Section A):

Write the numbers between two and nine in the circles and cover them with stickers. The number your child uncovers now represents the number of repetitions for the next exercise.



The Lottery Game

Through the Lottery Game, children become accustomed to regularly reviewing all of the previously learned pieces. The title of a piece or exercise should be written on each card and the cards collected in a small container. Every day, your child should draw a card, perform the piece or exercise, and then put the card in a second container. The cards should move from one box to the other within a predetermined length of time. This game is equally exciting for children, their parents, and their teachers, and it creates a happy and relaxed atmosphere.

Spin the Bottle

Lay cards with titles of review pieces or other exercises in a circle on the floor. (Examples: *Piece of choice with a beautiful tone*, *piece of choice with a beautiful bow hold*, etc.). Place an empty bottle in the middle of the circle. Now your child can spin the bottle and perform the piece or exercise to which the bottle points.

The Tree Game

Draw a large tree without leaves on a poster. Each time your child has repeated a piece and clearly improved its quality, he is allowed to draw a leaf on a branch or glue a real leaf in place.

Variation: Instead of a tree, you could draw a meadow or a flower vase on the poster. For each beautiful repetition, your child can draw a new flower.

More practice games

In the playroom, there are many aids that can help stimulate daily practice routines:

- ◆ Dominoes: For every well-performed practice activity, the child stands a domino on end in a row. When all review exercises have been completed, he is allowed to tip the first domino, starting a chain reaction.
- ◆ Legos®: When your child repeats a piece one or more times and demonstrates clear improvement, he is allowed to add a new Lego® to a house or tower. With time, he will be able to marvel at a masterpiece.
- ◆ Caravan: For each good repetition, a doll, model car or teddy bear can be added to a caravan.
- ◆ House of cards: With each successful repetition, a new section can be added.
- ◆ Paper chain: Each link in the chain represents a successful practice activity.

You can see that there are no limits to your imagination. Despite all the fun in these practice games, you should remember that your role is not that of an entertainer. Under your guidance, your child can collect fundamental experiences and develop characteristics that may have a lasting effect on his whole life: energy, continuity, sensitivity, self-confidence, self-assessment, and most importantly will power, patience and perseverance. However, this aim will be achieved only if the practice games follow high performance standards appropriate to the child's ability

Dear parents, when you build these suggestions into your daily practice program, you will give your child much more than simply many hours of pleasant entertainment.

Golden Rules of Repetition:

1. **Practice correctly from the very beginning!**
Strive to perform every repetition with great care and accuracy. You can only "reap" what you "sow."
2. **Concentrate fully on the task to be learned** and practice it so many times that you can play it confidently, indeed until you simply cannot play it wrong!
3. **Practice slowly at first so that you can play faster and with more confidence later on!**
If you rarely or never practice slowly, you will certainly make many mistakes that you don't notice. Your mind can only follow along and prevent possible mistakes when you practice slowly and carefully.
4. **Divide a difficult task into several smaller tasks!**
If a difficult passage doesn't improve, divide it into smaller steps. They should be small enough so that they can be played with confidence in a slow tempo.
5. **Practice difficult passages with different rhythms!**
Use different bowings or rhythms, practice slowly or quickly, softly or loudly, play sadly, thoughtfully or happily.