

Developing Initiative in Teenagers

by Diana Dickerson

As parents and teachers we have to review our role in the students playing often. If we consider the Early Years (up to 7 years), Tweenies (8 - 12) and the Teenager (13 upwards) we will see an enormous change in our roles over these times.

Having been through the Early Years where children are keen to please and accept authority with little question, to then step into the much more dangerous and scary Tweenie years where children question authority and challenge both how and when to practise, it now changes again as both teachers and parents have to ensure students develop good playing and practice habits where the parent plays a much lesser role.

Whilst some parents will tuck the lesson notebook into the music bag weekly and jump around with joy that they no longer have to sit through the lesson each week, others will try to sneak into lessons and dictate practice step by step at home until the teenager throws down the instrument and refuses to play ever again! Which parent is correct? Is there a right answer?

Each student requires the parent to withdraw at different times. A child who has a close relationship with the parent and sees the practice as quality time will be mortified if the parent suddenly stops guiding practice and sitting in. In this case the parent would be wise to guide the child by asking questions:

- What should you practice today?
- What should we start with?
- Would you like to playthrough that piece today and practice it tomorrow?
- Why don't you choose a piece to review for fun?

Make the student start to think about the structure of their practice themselves. If a parent is used to sitting very close to the child during practice they should start to take a back seat and 'observe' rather than being interactive during practice. Look at it as a 'staged withdrawal'. This is the first step to making the student independent, trust the good work that has been done during the Early and Tweenie years.

Once a parent has withdrawn from both lessons and practice it is important the student understands what is expected of them. This is much easier if it is directed by the teacher and supported with gentle encouragement at home. If a parent feels the student is not doing what is expected of them a discreet phone or email conversation is the best way to resolve worries.

As the student becomes used to practising alone they will need to learn the use of effective time management. Encourage them to have all their materials to hand for practice and pick a regular time slot each day just as you will have done when practising together. Teachers can ask a student to

keep a practice log; this shouldn't be as a device for 'checking up' on them but rather as a means of helping them to evaluate their practice. Some students are very good at following schedules and if given a list of work with an idea of duration for each task will practice effectively, however others find this laborious and uncreative. These students may need more creative ideas to keep them going. Often finding a practice buddy helps and if they play in band or orchestra this can be motivation enough.

It is really important the teacher sends the student away each week completely confident they know what is expected of them. Students must also know the teacher has expectations and whilst teachers mustn't come down too heavily on a less motivated student they must make sure the student knows that not practising is completely unacceptable to them. As parents and teachers it is our job to create initiative in teenagers and if we don't they will quit.

Teachers must ask themselves, 'What do I want the student to know and be able to do?' We want the student to be able to teach themselves and be self-directed.

Ways to make this happen

- Make sure pieces are developmentally appropriate
- Set students realistic goals
- Guide realisation that part of practice/class that is boring is bearable as it becomes part of the whole that is rewarding
- Stress that mastery of goals equals development of skills
- Gaining credentials through graduation, exam or through competition
- Most effective goal - how much fun is it? Motivated by this

Motivation

Parents in particular must be careful here. The most intrinsic motivation of course is to do practice to avoid punishment. This is hardly in keeping with the Suzuki philosophy of nurturing. Similarly reward. Consider this carefully, whilst in the early years small rewards were acceptable they are not nearly so now. By now students really need to be working for a goal and valuing that, self chosen values. Ideally students will be very engaged in the process, enjoy the current piece and find reward in technical work. Help them by pointing out when they do this. Give them feedback that promotes capability.

Lastly, as parents it is important to keep surrounding them in good music. Teenagers may choose to play rock, pop or thrash music in their rooms. This doesn't have to extend to the whole house. Quite music played around the house will still be absorbed, specific listening over breakfast or going to a concert as a family will still nurture that inner ear and remember all the listening in the early days is paying dividends now!