



# CELLO

## Cello Teaching Starter Kit

by David Holmes

I have had an excellent summer so far teaching cello at Suzuki Institutes in Utah, Oregon, and Chicago, with one left to go in South Dakota. I always enjoy the challenge of working in a new place with unknown students for a week's time to see what will "happen." I get inspired meeting new teachers and families as well. Despite the variation in geography and in people, no matter where I go parents always ask the same question: "How do I get my child to practice without resorting to violence?" If only I knew the one size fits all answer. String teachers who like to start beginners always ask one question as well: "How do I teach my beginning cellists the necessary skills to achieve success from the start?" I have taken classes in Suzuki pedagogy from books 1-10 and in almost every class, regardless of the level being taught, the issue of teaching the basic skills to the beginner always gets raised. This is because string teachers all know that a successful foundation is crucial for a good long-term prognosis. This article will cover skills that the beginning cellist needs, and although I am a Suzuki teacher and will focus on the small beginner, these skills apply to cellists at all ages. The differences occur in the approaches we use to teach student's of varying ages, not in the actual content of what is taught.

With a new cello student, I like to meet with the parents ahead of time, without their child, to get to know them a bit and to clearly present what is involved in taking Suzuki cello lessons. This is the beginning of the parent education part, an area I must admit that I could do better in, perhaps by giving cello lessons to the parent prior to teaching their child, as some teachers do. I try to spell out to parents as plainly as possible what the expectations are and how crucial their daily involvement at home is. I do provide a parent notebook with copies of articles about motivation and practice that I think could be useful to them, and insist that they listen to the CD every day, practice daily, read *Nurtured by Love*, and pray a lot (joke). Though it may be the first time I mention these important habits to them,

it will certainly not be the last. The really fine string teachers I know have core values that they absolutely do their best to insist their students and parents abide by. Tactful insistence and persistence are essential traits in a teacher's arsenal.

In addition to getting the parents on board, another lesson I've learned with the beginning Suzuki student is to present new skills at what some might consider a glacial pace. One of the easiest mistakes a string teacher can make (I have certainly made it) is to proceed too quickly with a student. Even if a student seems to "get" a new skill quickly, repetition and time are still crucial for solidifying any motor skill. What they did well in the lesson may, through any number of causes, actually be worse by next week. We get pushed into proceeding too quickly for a number of reasons. One can be that the parents or students are chomping at the bit to "move ahead," which if given into, can actually be a step backward. Another reason can be that I, as the teacher, don't have enough ways to present a particular skill, so the student and I start getting bored with the same old same old. Finding variable ways to present many skills requires much thought, some inspiration, and a lot of experience.

There is never a point when we teachers feel like we know it all, is there? As we teach there is a constant tension and maybe even a fair amount of consternation in our own minds between what we know, what we do not know, and yes, what we have forgotten. This built in professional "insecurity" can be viewed as both a blessing and a curse, depending on the mood of the moment, although truly, it is more of a blessing to be part of a profession that we can always get better at.

Here is a list of starter ideas for the new cello student.

### Posture, the chair, and the cello

1. Chair qualities: Choose an armless, flat-bottomed chair with a height that makes the upper leg go slightly down toward the knee when sitting on the

front edge.

2. Where to sit on the chair: Sit on front edge of chair, but not too close to the edge. Notice that you sit on your leg bones, not on your rear end
3. Feet and Legs: Right foot goes straight out from the body (12 o'clock position), toes below knees. Left foot angles out to the left (11 o'clock position), toes and foot slightly out in front of the knees. Notice how this sitting position causes a slight body turn to the student's left. This can help with fitting the cello pegs comfortably and with reaching the A-string with the bow. Slightly leaning forward in the chair is helpful, too.
4. Back: Tall back is essential and takes some training. Practice sitting without slumping the back, but also without being so tall that the small of the back pushes forward. Sit slumped; sit too tall; sit "just right."
5. Shoulders: low and released, with arms hanging down. Practice swinging arms up and letting them drop down on legs. Look for a back position that allows the hands to land with a "plop" on the knees, not the thighs.
6. Cello placement: the cello fits gently between the knees with the lower points of the bouts curving around the knees. The left leg rests on the back side of the cello and right leg touches the flat side section.

### Left Hand

1. Shaping the hand: Make a gentle fist with thumb straight out.
2. Hand/Arm relationship. Pretend to knock on a door for straight arm alignment with a slight arch in the wrist.
3. Large motions of hand and arm together:
  - *Knuckle knocks*: use bouncy motion in arm as you "kangaroo" a gentle fist from first position to the end of the fingerboard. Keep back tall, head still, and shoulders loose.

- *Ski jumps* using 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers gently on D-string or in the “ditch” between strings. The thumb is on the A- and D-strings pointing straight and relaxed. Start in first position and pluck the string when “jumping off” the cello at the end of the fingerboard. Launch the arm out in front of the cello, not to the left side. Get fluid with this skill.
4. Learn the names of finger numbers 1-4 very well. Have someone touch each finger and have the student say which number they touched. Do the same with student’s eyes closed. Tap 1 and thumb, 2 and thumb, etc.
  5. Relationship of 2<sup>nd</sup> finger and thumb: Do the elevator game up and down a dowel stick. 2 and thumb travel together when the “elevator” moves. When the elevator stops, 2 lifts in the air to “open the door.” Also, pass a playing card, a round piece of play-doh, or a dollar bill between people using only the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger and the thumb. (This can be done with the bow hand as well.) Later, with the cello, thumb and 2<sup>nd</sup> finger reach around the neck and tap on other side of the C-string. Move arm up and down the neck this way, tapping thumb and 2 as you go both on the strings and in the “ditches.”
  6. Finger independence and control.
    - Do “flicks” and “taps” using the thumb with each finger. Flick paper wads; flick nerf balls across the floor. Tap near your ear. Can you hear the thumping sound? Tap and flick with all 4 fingers combined with the thumb.
    - *More advanced:* pluck the A- and D-strings with all 4 fingers. Randomize the finger numbers. Do plucking by both pulling in to the hand and flicking away from the hand. Pluck in 4<sup>th</sup> position first (the strings are higher there) and work back to first position. After left hand is set with all fingers down on D-string, have the students pluck the A-string with each finger as the other fingers on D-string stay in place.
  7. Balancing arm weight into the fingers: Four curved fingers on a table top or on the top of a ledge (music stand, perhaps) with thumb behind 2, with a slight arch to the wrist, otherwise a straight arm. Feel the weight of your

arm going through your fingers when you do this. Let your elbow hang loosely from the shoulder.

8. Fine motor control: Play “Simon says” for lifting and putting down each curved finger. Lift fingers from the base knuckle and fingers stay curved in the air. This can be done on a flat surface, music stand, or on the cello’s left shoulder in playing position.
9. Placing fingers on the cello fingerboard: Hold the D-string down with right hand at the middle of the string’s length (parent can help with this in the beginning). Say and do the following with the cello hand: “2 and thumb, 3, reach back with 1, 4”. (Learn this phrase *very well*, please). Release string with right hand keeping it down with the left hand. Check arm and wrist alignment: slight arch in wrist, elbow naturally hangs, but still has a significant distance from the body. Look for a straight line from elbow, wrist, and pinky, fingers slightly slanted (as if going to drink a glass of water). *Don’t let the thumb push up or squeeze the cello neck!!!!* More advanced: do jumping jacks, where the arm lifts the fingers in perfect position off the string followed by a return to the string with no changes.

## Bow Hold

### 1. Shaping the Hand.

- Make a hand shape with thumb touching the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers at the top crease of the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger. Keep a gentle, curved thumb on the underside. Look for the “turtle shell” shaped hole created by the fingers of your hand. Let the pinky and index fingers be the “ears” of this bunny, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers hanging over as the nose.
- Add a pencil or a straw to this hand (a carrot for the bunny) between the thumb and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers. Let someone easily remove the pencil from your hand. No thumb squeezing? *Good!!*
- Gently roll the pencil a little in your hand (bunny chewing) by bending and straightening the thumb.
- Wiggle the ears (index finger and pinky).

### 2. Every finger has its place on the bow:

- Thumb touches the stick and the frog at the half-brown, half-black spot. The thumb is slightly curved

to create a bump in the knuckle. The thumb touches the bow on the right corner of the nail spot.

- The 1<sup>st</sup> finger touches at the top knuckle crease nearest the nail and is gently curved.
  - The 2<sup>nd</sup> finger is “Long John Silver,” so he touches the stick *and* top of the silver part of the bow.
  - The 3<sup>rd</sup> finger touches the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, but rests its tip slightly higher than the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger (since it’s shorter than the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger). It touches the stick and the frog, like finger #2.
  - The 4<sup>th</sup> finger (pinky) is curved and placed above the dot on the frog, near the top of the stick, but still over the side a bit.
3. Windows, Caves, and Doors: There are 2 “windows” in the bow hold: one between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> fingers and one between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers. All fingers remain soft and curved. There is a “cave” created in the palm of the hand, which should have a feeling of a dome because of the curved fingers and thumb. The “front door” to the cave (the first finger side of the hand) is smaller than the “back door” created on the pinky side of the bow hand.
  4. Start your 500 bow hold chart. Bring it to lessons with you. Only good bow holds can count on the chart.

## Rhythm, Pitch, Musicianship:

1. Listen to the CD daily. This is so very essential, and yet it’s the easiest thing to forget. Play it so much that you hear the next tune even before it starts to play. Play it so often that you can’t forget it. Like everyone does with their favorite music, play it and play it again until it becomes an ear worm. If you as a parent are tired of hearing the CD you might almost be playing it enough. Active listening, where the person is doing nothing but listening, is the best way to get pieces seared into the memory. Passive listening, where it is background music to some other activity, is better than nothing. Sing along with the CD. Matching pitch with one’s own voice is essential to ear development. Encourage singing—it’s the well-spring of our musical expression.
2. Clap, say, tap, sing the Twinkle rhythms: “Pepperoni pizza,” “Ice cream shh cone,” “Stop pony stop pony,” and “I would like a motorcycle.”

Whisper the Twinkle rhythms, sing them, maybe even shout them, do knuckle knocks on your cello with them. Do them with your feet. Alternate feet and hands tapping.

3. Pulse is the unending, steady heartbeat of every piece. Create a pulse in the feet while performing the Twinkle rhythms with your voice or with tapping of clapping.
4. Learn the concepts of high and low pitches. Sing low notes, sing high notes, sing sirens that go from low to high and back again. Sing a note and have the other person sing it back. Try

singing 2 notes and have it sung back.  
5. Legato=smooth; staccato=short.  
“Mississippi” is legato and “hot dog” is staccato. “I would like a motorcycle” is all legato.

I hope there was something helpful for you in all this detail. It seems we must start with the “trees” with string students so that they can later see the “forest.”

*David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented*

*a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. †*