



# VIOLIN

## Accommodating Students with Special Needs in Private Lessons & Orchestra

by Katie Gustafson with Becky Duchon

In the last few years I have been personally challenged by the subject of addressing special needs in my students. In the past I was intimidated by the challenge they posed, because I was worried that they would find the violin difficult, and I felt ill-equipped to help them. What did I know about dyslexia or ADHD or autism? However, I have learned since then that children with special needs can be just as successful on a stringed instrument as any other child.

Here is how it happened: I have recently gotten to know some great students with special needs who were kind enough not to notice that I had no idea what I was doing. Together we kept trying different things in our lessons until we stumbled into a few successes on our instruments. I later sought some help from Becky Duchon, a colleague from my school's Special Education department, in hopes of recreating that success with other students. (Why she wasn't my first call remains a mystery. Special Ed professionals should be on your speed dial.) She has helped me identify some ideas and strategies that I would like to share.

### Get background information on your student.

Parents, classroom teachers and Special Education managers often have a wealth of information that can help you. Most parents I have met are eager to help when I inquire about their child's background, and many will bring up the subject of any special needs before you even think of it. However, if you need to inquire and are unsure how to raise the subject tactfully, you might ask, "Is there anything else I should know about Johnny that will help me plan for our lessons?"

Classroom teachers and Special Educators can also discuss the child's background with you. (If you are a private instructor, you will need parent permission for this.) They will likely have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that will outline observations about the student's academic history, social and emotional health, relevant medical information, and goals to improve their situation at school. There are other forms

called ILPs (Individualized Learning Plan) and 504s, which indicate that faculty members are seeking interventions for struggling students who are not in the Special Education program. All of these resources can inform your understanding of the student.

### Be cautious about labels.

We have all heard of ADHD and bipolar disorder, and anyone who saw Rainman probably feels like an autism expert. The problem is, most of my students with autism do not act like Raymond Babbitt. In fact, if I didn't know which of them have autism, I would never have thought to put them in the same category. Labels can help us categorize certain behaviors we see in students, but sometimes they do more harm than good because we get negative associations about what they mean. Running home to google ADHD may or may not help you. It might just lead to apprehension about all of the crazy stuff that might happen in tomorrow's lesson. My point is this: every student is different. What will help you the most is to research the individual child rather than whatever label we have assigned to them.

### Identify how their needs might manifest in a music lesson.

I have one student who is particularly sensitive, and can become overwhelmed when he has to interact with too many people. To help with this, I have put him into a small lesson group, and I allow him to sit near the back of the orchestra where he can have more personal space. Another student has difficulty processing instructions that have several steps. To help her get through something complicated, I give her one instruction at a time, and make sure she masters it before giving her another.

Several years ago I had a high school student who would get very fidgety during our private lessons. We started doing our lessons standing up, and during breaks between songs he would pace around while we talked about things. It sounds chaotic, but for him it worked rather well. Be ready to be flexible, since problems often require

creative solutions.

### Analyze behavior rather than judging it.

It is easy to lump a lot of behaviors into the category of "non-compliance." If a student gets frustrated and is acting out, we call it a bad attitude. If a student repeatedly loses their music, we call it negligence or being irresponsible. If a student fails to practice, we call it laziness. And sometimes these things are true; all they need is some accountability to get them back on track.

But often (especially when there are special needs involved) there is an important reason behind the behavior that changes how we should respond to it. The student who is acting out might be frustrated because he does not understand how to play part of the song. Instead of a punishment, he might just need you to redirect his attention toward a creative way of getting past the hard part of the song. The student who loses their music might have trouble with organizing information and materials the way other students can (check their IEP!). Instead of a punishment, she might benefit from some tips on how to store all of her orchestra supplies with her instrument so they are easier to keep track of. The student who fails to practice might be lazy, but they might have a hard time working independently, or they might not understand what good practicing looks like. Use an analytical eye to try to understand what is behind the behavior before you dismiss it as being disobedient.

### And finally: whenever possible, have fun.

This is my personal style. In some cases it makes me a better teacher, and in some cases it might make me worse, but it's my style. Here is a sound bite from a lesson I had a few weeks ago:

"Ok, how about this? I know this is a hard song, but instead of giving up, let's pretend that all of the notes we play wrong are like people falling off a ship. It's our job to see how many of them we can rescue. So if we play a wrong note, let's shout "*Man Overboard!*" and see if we can fix it. The more notes we fix, the more people we save!

If you save all of the people who fall off the ship, I'll give you a medal of bravery.”

Inevitably, the first time we tried this, the student got excited about getting to shout “man overboard” and we didn't make it very far because we were laughing. However, the second time he did much

better. Plus, laughing is far preferable to giving up. Never underestimate the power of psychology.

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