



VIOLIN

Parent Involvement in Music Lessons: A Brainstorming Session

by Katie Gustafson

I had a conversation with a friend recently who told me that her six-year-old son was taking piano lessons with her aunt via Facetime. My friend has been supervising the lessons to assist with physical corrections and practice reminders. She told me how much fun she has had learning piano along with him and being able to support him when he needs help. The conversation reminded me what a powerful ally parents can be in their children's education! There is plenty of anecdotal evidence (and a fair amount of academic research) to support this idea, which is why schools strongly encourage parent/teacher conferences and reading to your kids nightly.

In the music field, the Suzuki Method recruits parents from the beginning to be practice partners for their children. This sets them up to remain involved even once their children become old enough to practice independently. Unfortunately, many non-Suzuki parents balk at this level of commitment, and older students might resist having their parents hover too much. So what can we do to

encourage parent involvement in simple, non-threatening ways?

To answer this question I decided to turn to one of my favorite teaching resources: fellow colleagues. The Facebook group "School Orchestra and String Teachers" allows members to share questions and get ideas from thousands of fellow teachers. On the subject of parent involvement, they did not disappoint! The following list has a variety of possible ways that you can encourage parents to support their child's learning:

1. **Invite parents to attend a private lesson with their child.** Some parents may do this already, but many probably do not, and might come if you invite them. Most find it highly informative when they do. Watching their child work one-on-one with the teacher will help them understand the struggles and progress their child is experiencing, allowing them to give their child more specific and meaningful encouragement.

2. **Request that parents help their child establish practice routines.** Parents may not know how to help their child with a correct bow hold, but they can certainly help their child make a plan for where and when they will practice each day. This may sound obvious to you, but it is not necessarily obvious to people who do not have experience learning an instrument. A specific request from you might encourage some parents who otherwise might not know how to help.

3. **Encourage regular at-home performances.** Formal recitals can be intimidating, but playing a piece or exercise for Mom or Dad in the living room is much easier. Parents can do this spontaneously, or give their child advance warning if they are reluctant to play. ("If you don't feel ready to play something right now, I'll give you a few days to practice more. On Friday I'll ask you again.")

4. **Feature "family ensembles" on a recital or concert.** I used to work in a school district where the band program had a Family Band concert every year. Parents who knew how to play an instrument could join their child for a casual performance. There were only a couple of rehearsals, and the music was simple, but the kids loved it! If you have a private studio, you could invite willing parents to play a duet with their child at a performance, or at home just for fun!

5. **Send out a Monthly Newsletter.** (Courtesy of Maggie Mercer, elementary orchestra teacher.) A brief but regular newsletter is a great way to keep parents up to date on events, schedule changes, and assignments. You could also use it as an opportunity to feature some of the above suggestions on how parents can support their child. Consider having a "technique of the month" section, helping parents identify one thing they can watch for while their child is playing their instrument. (Example: A graphic of a bow moving parallel to bridge, and another with a crooked bow, and a brief explanation of why the difference matters.)

6. **Create a parent/child assignment.** (Courtesy of Maggie Mercer) Consider having an assignment where parents assess their child on specific, easily identifiable skills (see sample provided). Another option would be to have kids teach a basic skill to their parents. Beginners, in particular, might enjoy teaching their parent

Student name _____

Parent Assessment for Orchestra

Dear Parents,

Your input on this assessment will help us evaluate your child's progress and practice time needs. Please answer the questions below, sign the form, and **have your child return this form at his/her next lesson FOR A PRIZE!**

Your child should be able to demonstrate the following to you: (Circle one)

Your child can play MSS 4x on open D with bow perfectly parallel to the bridge. Yes No

Your child can demonstrate a perfect bow hold (see photos in EE book): Yes No

Your child can play a whole line of *Samba La Bamba*. Yes No

Your child can play measures 1-29 in *Tumbleweed*. Yes No

Your child can play 8 measures of their choice from *Sailors' Song* Yes No

Can your child tell you how many counts a half note and a quarter note receive? Yes No

Your child can play D scale MSS up and down. Yes No

Have your child explain what "squishing the bunnies" (violins and violas) or "elbow elevators" (cellos and basses) means. In addition to being silly analogies, did this explanation make sense? Yes No

Have your child play "The Mystery Song". Can you name that tune? _____

Please sign and date below, and have your child return the form to class. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this assessment!

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

how to hold the bow correctly, or how to pluck the notes for an easy tune. They could complete the assignment by e-mailing you a photo or video of their parent learning the skill. If you wanted to make it low pressure, it could be for extra credit, or to win some sort of prize.

7. Create Tutorial Videos or Livestream practice sessions. *(Courtesy of Anna Radspinner)* For the more tech-savvy among us, YouTube is a great way to provide learning resources for families to access at home. With your own YouTube channel, you could create short tutorial videos on a wide variety of skills or musical excerpts. Parents could watch them with their child and help them review. Another option is to host livestream practice sessions to walk students through useful review of class materials, technical

skills or concert repertoire. To see a good example of this, search for the YouTube channel “PortProud,” created by Anna Radspinner.

One final note: As you invite parents to come along their child in their musical journey, encourage them to play the role of cheerleader rather than taskmaster. This will help students to be more receptive to their parents’ involvement and pave the way for future support.

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