



## CELLO

### Bringing Things into Focus

by Teresa Richardson

The ability to focus is an essential skill that young students learn in music lessons. In my own studio, I am troubleshooting ways to best serve my young beginners for whom focusing in lessons can be a significant challenge. My goal for these students is to help them listen, follow directions, and remain actively engaged. Here are a few strategies I have found to be effective in helping my students.

It is, of course, crucial to limit distractions in the studio. I ask that students and parents silence phones and place them out of reach. I encourage parents to keep siblings quietly occupied or have them wait outside. Sometimes I even find it necessary to give a polite reminder that the parent needs to remain a silent observer, as I know a child can feel overwhelmed when receiving directions from both a parent and teacher.

I try to offer a lot of structure in my lessons with young students who struggle to focus. Students who need to move around a room and have a hard time sitting still can benefit from aids that guide their movements. For example, a foot chart or a hula hoop “magic circle” can communicate where the student’s body needs to be. Some teachers find fun ways of helping a student remain stationary by having them balance a stuffed animal on their head or keep their feet covering hidden coins.

Some students benefit greatly from a visual agenda. This does take the teacher a few minutes to create ahead of time but can make all the difference for students who need predictability to thrive. Examples of a visual agenda can include a written list, paper “cards” with images or hints, a bag of objects, or a board game.

I also find my students focus better when I communicate my expectations simply and clearly. Some students enjoy maintaining agency through choosing the order in which they complete tasks, while others appreciate the predictability of a consistent weekly routine. A “one-point” lesson with a single central goal (e.g. a focus on tone quality) focuses attention more easily than a multiple-point lesson.

I always include at least two breaks in my agenda for physical movement. Young students welcome the opportunity to move, and I use the time as both a reward and a thank you to the student for making a good effort to focus with the instrument. I might challenge a student to stand up from the chair and sit back down without moving their feet, or practice rhythms with body percussion, marching, shakers, or castanets. We practice bowing patterns with vertical “air bowing,” or trace stickers on the bow with the right index finger. Teacher and student can stand and face each other to do the “Rhody Dance,” taking big and small steps to reflect the bowing pattern. I even have my students take a crayon and draw bowing motions on a piece of paper. I love to use body solfege for Suzuki Book 1 pieces. (My ascending scale is: feet, shins, knees, thighs, hips, shoulders, head, sky) Sometimes, a student just needs to do a few jumping jacks to reset!

For kids whose attention drifts a lot, I like to incorporate plenty of “games.” Young students like to “win,” and gamifying a concept can provide the opportunity to do just that. Guessing games are great, as are games that use a buzzer or a bell to indicate whether something was correct. Games that require eyes to be closed can help eliminate visual distractions. Using a timer adds urgency: How fast can you plop all four fingers down on the D string after playing open A? How many correct reps can you do in thirty seconds? Can you focus your eyes on your curved bow thumb for one whole minute?

Immediate positive reinforcement is very satisfying for a young student and can really bolster continued focus. Kids can get positive reinforcement from getting a high five, taking a bow, eating a Cheerio, getting a sticker, moving ahead on the game board, or earning a visual point (bead, crayon, etc.). My studio has a popular “emergency goat noisemaker” with four buttons students can press to hear goat sounds! I’ve borrowed toys from my own children’s collection and had a student reach into a mystery box to pull out an item each time she finished a

task. I’ve even gathered costume accessories to transform a lesson into a gradual game of dress-up.

Lastly, communicating or posting a few basic rules can benefit students who thrive when given distinct parameters. A favorite rule of mine, and one I find quite crucial is “listen silently when it is the teacher’s turn to talk or demonstrate.” A parent in my studio had the brilliant idea to make a laminated sign that had a red stop sign on one side to indicate that it was time to listen, and a green traffic light on the opposite side giving the student agency to respond by following my directions. After only two or three lessons using the sign, the student had learned the rule and was more focused in subsequent lessons.

Working with kids who have short attention spans can be arduous and exhausting. It is important as teachers that we extend grace both to ourselves and our students, as there are so many elements in a student’s life which we can’t control. A child might have undiagnosed or untreated ADHD, and their family could be on a journey to find help and resources. It can be so helpful when a teacher chooses to meet a child and family where they are on their journey and is willing to entertain new ideas and strategies to best serve that student. When a lesson feels particularly exasperating, I find it useful to remind myself that a student is doing the best they can, even if their best feels particularly frustrating at that moment!

Working with young beginners to improve focus during lessons has required me to dig deep into my well of creativity to find working strategies. Despite the many challenges presented by students who struggle to focus, I have experienced fun, rewarding and truly wonderful moments filled with smiles and successes that remind me of why I teach. I hope that these ideas will help “bring things into focus” for your students, too!

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