

The Honeymoon Is Over. Now What?

A Parent's Guide To Helping Your Child Practice Piano



Your child was so excited to start learning piano (or any instrument for that matter). If you couldn't find him right away, you would just listen for the piano playing in the background. (*For the sake of continuity, I will use the masculine pronoun "he". If you have a daughter, please just insert "she".*) It wasn't a struggle at practice time and, in fact, your child would count down the days to their next lesson. You were thinking, "I am so glad we bought our piano!" or "It was worth calling in all our favors with family to move this huge piano into the house." Or maybe even, "Look how excited he is! Could we have the next Beethoven or Mozart on our hands and our retirement is paid for?" Okay, maybe not quite the last one, but all in all life is great!

Then, one week there is no count down to the next lesson. Another week goes by and you have to remind your child to practice. And, one week your child seems more interested in the latest video game/movie/book/sporting event, and your dreams of a retirement paid by your budding concert pianist are dashed. It happens slowly and can occur anywhere between a few months or a year into lesson. Is it possible that your child no longer wants to take piano lessons? How could this have happened?

For a little perspective, I have played piano for almost 30 years and have never regretted the years of lessons and hard work. Yet, if you were to ask my parents they would tell you that they had to be involved in my practice time. Yes, they had to set up a practice schedule when I was starting out. Yes, they had to tell me that I could not quit when the initial honeymoon of learning piano wore off because, not only had the piano been expensive, but I had a commitment to finish out the year. Do I feel that they forced me into piano? Not at all. In fact, I had begged for lessons for years before my parents were willing to purchase a piano.

The honeymoon period is a great stage, but eventually the newness wears off. The scales that were new and exciting just aren't anymore. Practicing a particular technique or song just isn't fun anymore. So, how do we balance teaching our child to finish a commitment and allowing them to leave an activity they truly no longer enjoy? In fact, you will probably find that as your child continues on in piano lessons there will be an ebb and flow over the years on how much they love taking lessons.

When the honeymoon is over, here are some suggestions to help your child find that love for piano again, without pulling out your hair.

Keep the lines of communication open with your child's teacher. Talk to the teacher about your concerns. Is the teacher noticing anything concerning during lesson time? Perhaps the teacher will allow you to sit in on a lesson or two to get a sense of what your child should be doing during the week.

Set up a practice schedule with your child that allows them time to complete homework, participate in their other extra-curricular activities, and have down time. I recommend 15 minutes, 5 days a week for students with 30 minute weekly lessons. This ensures your child is able to get the practice they need in small bits and is able to consistently move forward in their programming.

Review their practice book and, if necessary help your child organize their practice time. I recommend beginning with scales or technique to warm up the fingers, but everything else is really up to what works for your child. Do they prefer to get the hard stuff out of the way or start

with something easy? Do they have a preference for certain parts of their practice? Could those be used as a reward for getting the less enjoyable tasks out of the way?

Help your child find ways to change the way they practice scales, chords, or other types of technique. Technique is an important part of learning a new instrument. It helps develop finger dexterity and strength, which allows a student to play more difficult pieces (including those on the radio he would love to play). To be honest, I hated practicing my technique so I can understand why many students would choose this as their least favorite part of practice. Fortunately, I had a teacher who encouraged me to play using various rhythms. Not only did it challenge me, but made it possible to change the same scale as many times as I wanted in a week. Below are a few ideas to get your child started.

- Genres of music (have your child choose the ones they like listening too):
 - March
 - Waltz
 - Salsa or Latin music
 - Rock 'n Roll
 - Dance music
 - Celtic
 - 80's hair band
 - 90's grunge
 - Disco
- Rhythms: (*Strong is a note with extra emphasis. Weak is a note with no emphasis.*)
 - Strong, weak, weak, weak (typical in 4/4 time)
 - Strong, weak, Strong, weak (typical in 2/4 time)
 - Note length pattern of long-short, long-short (typical in 6/8 time)

Encourage your child to improvise and create new songs using the skills they have already learnt. Even though it may not seem like practicing, getting your child to make up songs allows him to incorporate what he is learning with previous concepts in an organic manner. I usually recommend this for the end of a practice session once everything else has been practiced. If your child is unsure where to start, encourage them to make a melody with just black keys or white keys to start.

Ask your child to teach you parts of what they have learnt. Not only does it allow you to follow your child's progress, but it puts them in the exciting position of being your teacher. And, what child doesn't like being in charge once in a while? My twins may be too young for lessons, but it hasn't stopped them from 'teaching' mommy a thing or two on the piano. They love the idea of changing the power dynamic to themselves and it's a fun activity for all.

If you try these suggestions and find that your child still does not want to continue piano lessons, then it is up to you whether you want to have your child continue lessons. Before giving up on piano, determine that your child's desire to quit is not another issue such as teacher-student conflict, scheduling conflict, program incompatibility. Decide what is a fair trial period for taking piano lessons that allows your child to honor the commitment made to the teacher (they are holding a spot that could have gone to someone else) and allows your child to make an informed decision on whether piano is for them. This trial period could be a year, two years, three years, etc.

Hopefully, these suggestions will make practice time more enjoyable for your child, and you. Remember that the excitement of learning a new instrument will come and go. And, while learning anything new takes hard work and dedication, I have yet to hear an adult say, "I regret learning to play piano". Who knows, maybe that retirement plan sponsored by your child may come about?



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For more information, please visit www.mustlovemusic.ca