

5 WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF MUSIC LESSONS

These guidelines will help you to have a successful, rewarding experience learning an instrument. These practical tips have been gathered from years of teaching in the music education field.

1. Start at the Right Age

Adults can begin on any instrument at any time. Their success is based on how willing they are to commit to practicing. An adult of any age or generation can enjoy the benefits of learning an instrument.

For children, starting private lessons at the right age is a key element to their success. Some people will tell you “the sooner, the better” but this mindset can actually backfire and be a negative. Children placed into lessons too soon often feel overwhelmed and frustrated and then want to stop lessons. The last thing you want to do is turn your child off music just because he or she had one unpleasant experience which could have been prevented. Often, if a child waits even one year to start lessons, the progress will be much faster. Children older than the suggested earliest starting age usually do very well. The following are guidelines that have been found to be successful in determining how young a child can start taking music lessons.

4 and Younger

If a pre-schooler has a keen desire to begin music lessons, a group music class such as *Music & Movement* will give him or her a good foundation in music basics which will be helpful in later private lessons. Private lessons for children this young are not developmentally-appropriate, as children this age learn much more effectively through an environment of play and movement-based activity.

5 to 7 Years Old

Children who are in Kindergarten and first grade are strongly encouraged to participate in *Music & Movement* before beginning private instrument study. As with pre-schoolers, children this age learn more effectively in a group environment. *Music & Movement* provides children with enumerable skills that will lead to success in later private lessons, including note-reading, musical terms, writing musical notations, using dynamics, creating and writing new melodies and rhythms, ear training, and more. This two-year program also introduces students to proper singing technique, the glockenspiel (a pre-keyboard instrument), the dulcimer (a string instrument), and the recorder (a wind instrument), which helps them decide which type of instrument to pursue private study with in the future.

Piano/Keyboard & Violin

At our school, 7 years old is the youngest age that we start children in piano lessons and 6 years old is the youngest age that we start children in violin lessons. Different children learn best in different environments, so we offer both private and group study for children ages 7 to 9. Children older than 9 generally do well starting directly in private lessons. Children younger than 7 are best-served by honing their skills of note-reading, ear training, rhythmic dictation, etc. through *Music & Movement* before beginning to learn to play piano or violin. Further, children younger than 7 tend to not have the physical stamina and dexterity required to play the piano properly.

Guitar - Acoustic, Electric and Bass

8 years old is the earliest we recommend for guitar lessons. Guitar-playing requires a fair amount of pressure on the fingertips from pressing on the strings. Children younger than 8 generally have small hands and may find playing uncomfortable, so participating in a group music class first in order to develop musical skills is highly-recommended. Bass guitar students are generally at least 10 years old when beginning.

Voice Lessons

12 years old is recommended as the youngest age for private vocal lessons. Due to the physical nature of voice lessons (proper breathing techniques, development of the vocal chords and lung capacity), the younger body is generally not yet ready for the rigors of vocal technique. For children younger than 10, a children's choir or a pre-school music class is the best choice for learning how to use their voices properly, in a fun, relaxed environment. Our Kaleidoscope Choir offers an excellent opportunity for children in 1st through 5th grade to develop their vocal skills prior to private instruction.

Woodwinds, Brass & Percussion

Woodwind, brass, and percussion instrument instruction is often found within the context of a school band program. It is generally best for children who have access to a school band program to wait until they are part of the school band program to learn these instruments, to avoid the strong possibility of the student becoming bored with the slow pace of group instruction as opposed to private instruction. Most school band programs begin in 5th or 6th grade; we will start band instruments with younger students who do not have access to school band programs. Woodwind instruments include flute, clarinet, oboe, and bassoon. Brass instruments include trumpet/cornet, French horn, trombone, baritone/euphonium, and tuba. Percussion instruments include all types of drums, along with xylophone and other melodic instruments. Most school band programs will expect students learning percussion instruments to learn both drums and melodic percussion. Students who are interested in eventually learning a band instrument (especially budding percussionists) are highly encouraged to study piano as a starter instrument. Violin or guitar are also effective starter instruments.

2. Consider Both Private and Group Instruction

When beginning piano, violin or guitar study, some students benefit more from the one-on-one dynamic of private instruction. However, just like in a school band or choir class, many students feel more energized and encouraged when given the chance to start lessons in a group setting. Our group classes have a maximum of 6 (piano), 8 (guitar) or 12 (violin) participants, so that every student receives personal attention and instruction from the teacher. Be sure to weigh the benefits of each type of instruction according to your child's personality and learning style.

3. Take Lessons in a Professional Teaching Environment

Learning music is not just a matter of having a qualified teacher, but also having an environment that is focused on music education. Lessons in your own or someone else's home often involve distractions such as TV, pets, ringing telephones, other children, etc., while a professional school environment will have none of those. With only ½ to 1 hour of lesson time per week, a professional school can produce better results because the only focus in each lesson is on music instruction. Students in a school environment also have the benefit of hearing their peers who are at different levels, and by being exposed to a variety of musical instruments. In a music school, lessons are not just a hobby or sideline for the teacher, but a responsibility taken very seriously.

4. Use Recognized Teaching Materials

It is important that students learn through a curriculum that suits them and starts at a level that they are comfortable with. Excellent materials developed by professional music educators are made for students in a variety of situations. For example: in piano, there are different books for young beginners than for adult beginners. These materials are researched and continually upgraded and improved to make learning easier. Professionally-made materials ensure that no important part of learning the instrument can inadvertently be left out. And if you ever have to move to a different part of the country, qualified teachers and institutions will recognize the materials and be able to smoothly continue from where your previous teacher left off.

5. Make Practicing Easier

Just as with learning to read, becoming proficient in music takes regular practice. With some creativity, practicing will not feel like drudgery, and parents will not have to have a daily fight with their child over practicing. Here are some ways to make practicing easier and more enjoyable:

A) Time - Set the same time every day to practice so it becomes part of the daily and weekly routine.

B) Repetition - This is an effective method, particularly when setting practice schedules for beginners. To a young child, 20 to 30 minutes of practice time is ambiguous and can seem like an eternity, so instead of setting a timeframe, consider selecting an appropriate number of times that each piece or exercise should be played each day.

C) Rewards - This works well for children and adults alike. Some adults reward themselves with a cappuccino after a successful week of practicing. Parents can encourage children to practice by granting them occasional rewards for diligent practicing; in our school, many of our teachers reward young children with stars and stickers on their work. However, praise tends to be the most coveted award; there is just no substitute for a pat on the back for a job well done. And in the case of an occasional bad week, be sure to focus on the opportunity of the next week.

6. Select the Right Instrument for your Child

A tremendously important factor in your child's musical success is choosing an instrument (voice included) for study that will give your child a chance for success. If your child shows interest in learning a particular instrument, this may well be the best instrument for him or her to study in private lessons, although not necessarily. Other factors to consider include availability of instruments, cost of obtaining instruments, and student suitability to an instrument. One important factor of student suitability is age-appropriateness; others include cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development. If your child is interested in an instrument for which he or she is not yet developmentally ready, piano is a great instrument to learn in the meantime as a starter instrument, although guitar and violin are also good choices. If you are unsure which instrument to select, contact us for a free consultation.

Most importantly, HAVE FUN! Music is a gift to be enjoyed for a lifetime. Try not to have unrealistic expectations for your child to learn too quickly. Everyone learns at a different pace and the key is to be able to enjoy the journey.