



The Parent's Guide to Piano Practice Time: First Key Principles

The results happen in the six days between lessons

For successful learning to happen at home you want to consider what challenges the child faces, planning the optimal practice space, creating an established routine which, over an extended period of time, creates success.

Consider this: when your child is present for his piano lesson, he is spending *less than 1%* of his entire week with me. Consider all the other voices and influences your child encounters throughout the course of that week! Consequently, I work hard to ensure that the learning experience is as deep and rich as possible. On the other hand, the true learning happens over the course of the following six days.

Learning is ultimately making changes within the brain. How easy is it for you to establish a new habit or obtain a new skill? Learning to command the fingers to do new movements is as natural to us as our picking up a fork or pencil with our thumb and finger #4! Do you ever use fingers #4 and #5 to pick up anything? No? Connecting the brain to the fingers requires burning new neural pathways which takes time.

Now, in terms of learning to play the piano, the variable of time is not the only key principle. We parents tend to consider that *time* at the piano is what is most necessary for long term learning to occur. Yet we ourselves know that we are not always super productive during any given 20 minute window of time.

Practice Space. Does your child have a relatively quiet space in which to practice where there are minimal background distractions such as TV or music or even pets interrupting? The child doesn't require being confined to a back corner of the house but an honest evaluation of the set up would be helpful. Consider temperature, light (too little or too much), sound into the equation.

I visited a friend's home one day and was invited to sit and play their lovely new piano of which they were so very proud. What a challenge I had in playing! The orientation of the piano in the room was such that the sunlight was bursting through the adjacent window and blinding me. I couldn't read the music which they offered me as the light was too intense. A comfortable and appropriate physical space allows for the necessary mental focus creating mental intensity.

An established routine. We all do better at accomplishing our goals when we have the mental space and energy to focus. If the child knows that the routine is to practice in the morning before school, she will automatically do so. Mental and emotional energy will not be wasted by being siphoned off by screen time. Multiple, frequent sessions at the piano, something daily, is much more effective than one or two extended cram sessions during the week or even the night before.

Extended time. When the western pioneers were clearing their way to create the Oregon Trail, the path was originally difficult to follow. Getting wagon wheels to cover that rough terrain seemed almost impossible! (My ancestors decided that

they didn't think that early route was the most favorable for the needs of the family so that they decided to clear their own trail, the Applegate Trail.) Each set of wheels ground away more and more soil, making the path all the more clear and established. The U.S. National Park Service preserves these ruts from the 1840s even today!

Each time your child completes his theory workbook page and plays it on the piano (according to ability), drills his Sight Reading and Rhythm Cards—both the review and the new cards, watches the animal technique videos and then plays the pieces, reviews the pieces already learned from the current unit in his book, he is learning. She is “cutting those ruts” in the brain. Each time she mindfully plays the “sticky” sections in her new pieces, playing the little segments over and over, she is learning.

The child is not *learning* when approaching the new repertoire by playing it over and over and over from beginning to end, from beginning to end. That is not focused, mindful practice.

A short, ten minute sequence of focused practice is infinitely more effective in the long run than thirty minutes or random playing. The length of time at the piano is not necessarily the most important factor.

You as parents don't have to know everything about music in order to coach your child in his practice time. Your involvement during the lesson and after the lesson will do much to build a foundation which lends itself to successful learning. Remember the challenges which your child faces, evaluate the learning environment at home, guard the practice routine, and anticipate more and more lovely music to fill your home in the future!