

By [Ellen Pendleton Troyer](#), Baltimore Symphony Orchestra violinist

We all have that image in our minds. Sitting proudly in the audience while our little one performs beautifully on the piano or violin. “Wouldn’t it be nice if little Timmy learned to play the piano?” “Ashley has expressed interest in the violin, so let’s get her lessons.” Learning an instrument comes with so many benefits, right? The ability to concentrate, learning perseverance, better math skills, organizational ability, creative problem-solving, etc. The list goes on and on. But before you make room in the family budget for those music lessons, ask yourself this question. “Am I willing to take time out of my day to set up and supervise my young child’s practice time? Because if you’re not, you might be setting yourself (and your child) up for a bad experience. Their practice time – at least in the early years – is not like soccer or swim practice, where you can be there, but not present with your child. The upside is that in the early years, it’s only 15 or so minutes.

1. The first thing you need to assess is if your child is ready for discipline of music lessons.

Is he/she around the age of 4? If so, can she concentrate for 15 minutes at a time? If not, wait a year or two. If yes, then start your child with a teacher who has a lot of experience starting young children on their chosen instrument. There is truly an art to teaching music to the very young! If your child still can’t manage a 15-minute lesson, wait another year or two. Kids develop the ability to concentrate at different ages.

2. Make sure you are excited when you tell your child that he is going to learn how to play an instrument! If you’re not excited about it, they won’t be either.

3. Make sure that your child is exposed to all kinds of music from a young age—classical, jazz, blues, rock, folk, etc. Let them see you get in to it! Music is made of aural colors, and the more your child hears, the larger her palate will be.

4. Make daily practice a part of your child’s daily routine, like brushing their teeth, or getting dressed. (Or at least weekdays, if you can’t manage the weekends) Started early, and with a lot of encouragement and reminding from you, that habit will start to become routine. With younger children (ages 4-6) the afternoon or early evening might work better. As they get into the school years, I’ve found that setting aside practice time before school (as daunting as that sounds) produces quicker results with less time. Their brains are fresh, and even a few minutes of good concentrated time will pay off. My 9-year-old daughter, who has studied violin for 4 ½ years, (with someone else!) saw for herself how much easier it was to learn things if she practiced in the morning. Experiment, and see what works for you and your child.

5. Don’t let the first frustration or tantrum (or the second or the seventh) discourage you or your child. Those are normal, and almost every child will hit a wall of some kind. One of

the benefits of persevering through those times is that the child learns problem-solving. Something that seemed impossible to play two weeks ago is suddenly coming much easier.

The learning process is rarely a linear line – with music or anything – so don't let bumps in the road stop you. Your child will learn that no problem is insurmountable. Point out that anyone who has become really exceptional at anything – sports, chess, video games, you name it – had times where they didn't feel like working on the parts that didn't come easy, and became frustrated when they couldn't “get” it. If you end up with a screaming crying child (yes, I've been there) put it away for another time when she has calmed down. You and she will both survive.

If your child is consistently rebelling against playing a particular instrument, but is begging for lessons on another one, listen to him. There are several players in the BSO whose parents forced them to play one instrument, while they secretly pined to play another. Every child has his or her own preferences. A fitful non-practicing pianist may blossom as a cellist or flutist.

6. When your child finally gets it (whether it's “Mary had a little Lamb” or a Beethoven Sonata) show genuine pride and excitement. Accomplishments, no matter how small, are always something to be celebrated.

7. Don't forget to let your child “play with” her instrument, as well as “play it.” Let her creativity out. Have her make sound effects or make up a tune to a story she knows well, or even better, have her make her own story up! Tell her to make up a sad song, then a happy one. Music stimulates so many areas of the brain; your child just might surprise you!

8. Don't be afraid to use games in young children's practice. The penny game (or skittle game in my daughter's case) can be used where mastery of a difficult passage requires repetition. Set 5 or 10 pennies on the left side of the music stand. Each time he plays the passage correctly, he moves one penny to the right side of the stand. Every time he plays it wrong, all the pennies have to go back to the left side.

The goal is to get 10 pennies (or M&Ms or Skittles) to the right side of the stand. I also used small Halloween candies placed on my daughter's violin, to get her to hold her violin up correctly. If she played the piece all the way through without the candy falling off, she got to eat it. If not, it was mine! My daughter's favorite game when she was 4-6, was the “squirt bottle game.” I held a spray bottle aimed at her belly (she would raise her shirt up so I would get her clothes wet) and if she made a mistake or had a memory slip, I would squirt her belly. We would usually do this at the end of practice sessions as we'd both end up in a fit of laughter.

And finally, don't let the discipline of music get in the way of the joy of music-making.

Yes, it is hard. Yes, it can be frustrating. But the joy children experience when they really get “in” to a particular piece of music is something that can rarely be duplicated. Like anything in life, you get out of it what you put in to it.