



TRAINING GREAT *Practice Parents* by Elise Winters

Just as a child's environment determines whether they will speak Japanese or English, so it determines the musical skill they are able to attain. The most important ingredient in the environment of a young child is the parents.

In previous generations, high-level music performance was available only to a few fortunate children whose families could afford a daily tutor.

In the 1950s a passionate amateur violinist named Shinichi Suzuki had a realization. He reasoned, every child learned their native language. If they can learn something so incredibly complex and sophisticated simply by being surrounded by it, why not a musical instrument?

Suzuki saw much suffering in post-war Japan, and was a great lover of music and children. This love gave him the insight to reject a notion taken for granted at the time, that only a few children possess “talent,” and advocate that all children receive the opportunity to develop their mind and ability to the highest level.

Although Suzuki recognized that individual differences exist, he showed the world through his teaching—and shared through his writing—that every child has great talent and deserves the opportunity to use their gifts.

Suzuki's students universally played at a level of skill that was unheard of at the time (but which, because of his efforts, is no longer rare today). His students made headlines touring the world playing the Bach Double—a piece which at the time would be enough to guarantee admittance into a conservatory.

Suzuki held his parents to extremely high standards and could be quite direct with them if he saw that they were not being as diligent as he wished. Because he always spoke with great love, parents respected his guidance, and the results are history.

What Is a Practice Parent?

The practice parent attends lessons, takes detailed notes, and practices daily with their child at home, serving as the “home teacher” to instill the details covered in each lesson.

They ensure a high-quality musical environment for their child, including making sure to listen to the repertoire recording daily so that the child internalizes the sound.

The practice parent need not have a musical background. In fact, in families where only one of the parents has a musical background, the non-musical partner may have more success working with their child because they bring curiosity, innocence, and lack of ego to the experience.

While this role takes great dedication on the part of the parent, it is also a beautiful bonding opportunity, and one of the rare times the child gets to enjoy their parent's undivided attention. It is precious for parent and child to partner together for years toward two of the most important ideals—beautiful music and the development of a noble spirit.

What Difference Does it Make to Practice with a Parent?

A child (specifically age 4–12) whose parent is practicing with them will have much greater possibilities in the development of their ability than a child asked to practice on their own. These advantages include:

- They will have a better bowhold and left-hand form from the beginning, because their parent is able to see and correct postural details. This translates into a beautiful tone, intonation, and facility on the instrument.
- They will enjoy their practice time more, because it is quality time shared with a parent. This doesn't mean there will never be conflict, of course; but it is the parent's task to make practice a source of mutual enjoyment (and the teacher's job to help them do this).
- They will make steady progress, giving them confidence and a sense of purpose.
- Because they are able to achieve to a beautiful tone and tuning, they will enjoy their own music.

The child who is expected to practice on their own will face significant challenges, many of them invisible to the teacher:

- Unable to easily see their own posture and bow hand, they may develop incorrect posture, creating a handicap that can take years to correct.
- They may feel uncertain about how to practice, lacking a model for things teachers may take for granted such as repeating passages, listening to their tone and tuning, and problem-solving errors.
- Without the discipline and companionship of a parent to help them practice, they will practice less on average than other students.
- Since their parent less intimately involved with their violin study, they are less able to help navigate the nuances of this world. This includes understanding daily practice, talking about great performers and discovering musical opportunities beyond the lesson.
- To the extent that the progress more slowly, their progress may not be visible to them. This is discouraging and leads to practicing less.
- Their musical taste will become more sophisticated even as their skill lags behind, which may lead to them to feel disenchanting and pursue other interests which are more compelling.
- As they compare themselves to friends and peers

whose parents are practicing with them, they may naturally assume that they are simply less talented.

Empower the Parent

Not every parent is willing or able to make the investment to be an excellent practice parent.

However, when you share with parents the results that their involvement makes possible, many are willing to make some changes and sacrifices in order to give their child the best possible start.

On average in my studio, the difference between an 8-year-old whose practice partner is partially involved and one who is fully involved is completing Book 1 in two years versus nine months. Completing Book 2 also takes (on average) two years rather than one. The two students who began at the same time are now two years apart.

Being able to tell parents something like this (and please feel free to quote my numbers) makes a compelling case.

The parents enrolling in lessons with you are making an emotional and financial commitment to nurturing their child's artistic spirit. With this in mind, you can feel empowered to make a "big ask" to help their child achieve what is possible for them.

Some parents may imagine you are asking them to be a "tiger parent." Even if this concern does not arise, I often let parents know that this isn't where I'm coming from. It's just that violin is just quite difficult, and most of the nuances of posture are not visible to oneself. Even a very motivated and responsible child needs a second set of eyes to help them manage the many details of posture.

Parents find many creative solutions, including practicing virtually with their child, having a partner take on a household role that they have been accustomed to, or eliminating another activity. If you are working with a single parent with economic restraints, perhaps an older student in your studio can serve as the practice partner.

The strength of your request is what will bolster parents to prioritize so their child can fully blossom. A few years of commitment from them will make a lifelong difference in their child's self-awareness, discipline, confidence, attention to detail, physical coordination, and appreciation of beauty.

Many parents are glad to make this sacrifice when they know the difference it will make.

Two Steps Before Starting a New Student

I require families attend several observation lessons (up to three months for a very young child) so the child can observe the role of the teacher and student and, often, begin picking up posture and bowhold concepts. The students are motivated by watching the progress of students just older than themselves!

I choose my best students for incoming families to observe, to provide them with an excellent model.

Why Observation Lessons?

Observation lessons allow more cautious and introverted children to observe from a distance and get comfortable with a new person and setting.

Conversely, outgoing children see the model student following my guidance, focusing on the task, and saving their sharing until the end of lesson. They observe, “This is how things are here,” and adapt their own actions once they begin.

It might seem that observation lesson period is less critical for parents, but in fact the incoming parent is absorbing a new paradigm just as their child is. There are very few exemplars outside of violin classes for the role they are about to take on. As they see the model parent taking notes and asking informed questions, this takes the “practice parent” role from abstract to concrete.

Some incoming parents may—even after reading my policies—imagine the “practice parent” idea to be a nominal arrangement or hand-wavy ideal which won’t require too much effort on their part. Watching the model family will help them to correct this assumption and begin to envision themselves in this role. Some parents may decide it’s not for them. Of course I hope they will be inspired, but if they’re going to realize they’re not able to do this right now, best for them to discover this sooner rather than later.

During the observation lessons the parent, like their child, is also absorbing some basics about posture and playing. Once they start their own lessons they will already have some background knowledge, which will put them at ease and allow them to learn violin more quickly.

Wait ... Did You Say “Their Own Lessons”?

There is extraordinary value in having a few initial lessons with just the parent. Here is my “top ten” list (actually just six really good ones):

- It gives you a chance to get personally connected to the new parent. This will be incredibly important later on.
- It helps the parent understand the details of the technique

before they attempt to practice with their child. When these details are encountered later they will understand the content more thoroughly.

- It will help them to understand from personal experience how essential those tiny posture details are. They will see that a seemingly trivial adjustment can make a huge difference in tone, managing the bow, and physical comfort. Experiencing this for themselves will make them a much more detailed practice partner.
- Attending lesson without their young child will allow them to experience learning violin without trying to parent at the same time. Besides improving their focus, this will allow them to enjoy it more! Many parents wish they had learned to play as children and will cherish this time with you.
- They will have space to be authentic and vulnerable with you as they try something brand new. Similarly, you can interact with them in a more authentic and adult way.
- The parent will experience first-hand the difficulty of playing violin and have empathy for their child’s learning. This will naturally help them to be more patient and break new tasks into smaller steps for their child when needed.

If the child is old enough to entertain themselves quietly, it is fine for them to attend their parent’s lessons. (I keep some puzzles and quiet games for this purpose—children may be entertained for a longer time by a novel activity.) Seeing their mother or father learn violin—whether during lesson or at home—will build their own excitement and anticipation.

During these initial lessons the goal is not for the parent to achieve perfect technique, but rather for them to experience the instrument enough to be an effective coach. Coaching will be easier than playing; while they cannot see their own bowhold and position, they can easily see their child’s.

I generally tell the parent that I would like them to have 4–6 lessons with me before their child begins. Some very physically adept parents master the material in three lessons, but it’s impossible to know which parents these will be, and easier to finish early than to extend at the end.

Okay ... But Are the Parent Lessons Really, REALLY Necessary?

I've occasionally omitted parent lessons—e.g. with an 8–10-year-old student whose parent seemed especially competent and motivated. I learned a few things from these experiences.

- Every parent *appears* confident and organized, and this is very convincing to a novice teacher (which I was). As soon as they try to make a bowhold or press the notes of the scale this illusion disappears.

Parents do often believe they understand the item in question, but the gaps in their knowledge become apparent (to themselves as well as the teacher) when they try the skill. This applies to making a bowhold, but also translates into practicing with their child.

- When parents don't have an opportunity to try the violin themselves, they tend to take more of a back-seat role in practicing with their child. Since they only partially understand the concept being taught, it is more comfortable to let their child do whatever they're doing, with the illusion that it is correct (or at least "pretty close").
- Initially the "back-seat" approach looks like being a less detailed and skillful practice partner. A few months later it looks like having their child practice on their own well before they are ready. The child often supports this plan, partly because the parent's desire is transparent, and partly because they weren't that helpful anyway.
- My relationship with these parents was less personal, because we never had one-on-one time together. The lack of deeper connection made them less bonded to my studio, and it was less natural for them to reach out to me when they encountered challenges later on.

Of four particular students that I'm thinking of as I write these observations, three quit lessons relatively early—one after 3 months, and two others after a year. The fourth has been with me five years, but progressed at less than half the pace of my other students. In her case the mom had good intentions but lacked patience and organization to be consistent; so she was still partially involved.

Many parents are very eager for their child to get started, and the teacher may be tempted to succumb to their eagerness by settling for a less comprehensive parent training.

But these same parents are generally able to shift their motivation into mastering a bit of violin, which will ultimately give their child the best start.

Long Story Short ...

If you've never worked with parents before, you may feel a bit of trepidation doing things a different way. This includes potentially feeling intimidated by having them watch your lessons with their child, as well as making the "big ask" of having them attend a month of lessons by themselves before their child.

But I promise that once you do it, you'll never look back. It will make a huge difference in the effectiveness of your teaching, and you'll love getting to know the precious people who are the parents of your students.

Training Excellent Practice Parents: The Bottom Line

Set expectations before lessons begin.

Have the parents and child observe at least 4 lessons before coming for their own. This way the child and parents learn the behavior that is expected, for example seeing the other parent taking notes, and seeing the other child listening attentively and being respectful.

Parent education doesn't stop once the child begins lessons; it happens throughout the child's study.

Parents will eventually need to know almost everything about beginning violin technique.

The parent is the home teacher. The quality of the results in your studio will correlate directly to the quality of the corrections the parent is making at home. Almost everything you learn in teacher training you should also pass on to them ... in bite-size pieces. This includes technical corrections, teaching strategies, developmental info, etc.

Teach parents the violin skills in much the same way as you would teach the child.

It takes adults a similar amount of time to learn violin skills as it does for a young child ... and they often have more anxiety, self-judgment, tension, and internal distractions. Give them specific instructions, let them try it out in the lesson, and repeat it until it's clear. Parents will often assume that because

they understand your explanation conceptually, that they can do the skill. We often assume they can do this, too! In reality, though, they won't know if they understand it fully until they actually try it. Misconceptions and confusion will quickly become apparent when you have them try it ... and better during the lesson than at home.

Involve parents actively during lessons.

Parents have complicated lives to manage. If they don't feel their presence is valuable, they may choose not to attend lessons or pay full attention.

Give parents the role of note-taker, ask them to assist their child, teach them each skill (this also gives the child a little breather), and give them pointers on how to make corrections or structure the home practice.

If a child is misbehaving during class, their lesson is over. This is simply boundary-setting (it's not punitive). Teach the parent during the rest of the time.

Ask how listening went.

Daily listening is necessary for children to learn the songs. Immersive listening creates the depth of knowledge needed for fluency. Ask the parent *every* week how listening went.

Ask how practicing went.

We may avoid asking because we don't want to put parents on the spot. But when we do that, we're letting them down.

If they did practice, we want to make sure to praise that. If they need a little push or accountability, we need to provide this. If they practiced but it didn't go well (e.g. power struggles, distractibility), we should help problem-solve so that next week they can be more successful.

Give parents assignments specific to their role.

Assume that your parents take their role as violin assistant seriously. They will rise to your expectation. Pass on articles of interest from the Suzuki journal, Strings Magazine, etc.

Assign one book to parents each year. Reserve one group class for parent coffee and a book discussion. Two excellent books are Edmund Sprunger, *Helping Parents Practice: Ideas to Make it Easier* and Edward Kreitman, *Teaching from the Balance Point*.

Give feedback.

There may be times that you observe a difficult interaction between the parent and the child. While we cannot presume to know everything about the parent's relationship with their child, it is consistent with our role as coach and teacher to make observations, share thoughts, and support them.

Always ask permission before doing this, and always come from a place of gentle curiosity and compassion. It's easy to judge from the outside, and every parent is doing their best.

Asking About Violin Practice

Less experienced teachers may shy away from directly asking parents and students details about violin practice over the past week, but in doing so you inadvertently communicate to parents and students that practicing is not important to you. Families who practiced diligently are deprived of an opportunity to have you acknowledge their

hard work. The families who are struggling feel alone because you're not making space for them to talk about whatever may be going on. And families who have let the routine "slide" don't get the chance to hear you say, "Please do better this week" ... which is usually all that is needed.

Doesn't Everyone Know How to Be a Practice Parent?

Since it may be obvious to us as teachers what goes into being a good practice parent, we may assume that parents also know this. They don't! Communicating in advance what's desirable is *much* easier (for everyone!).

	The Brahms Family	The Salieri Family
Repertoire Listening	Listens every day, twice a day, for the whole first year of violin study.	Takes the CD out of the car stereo and forgets to put it back in again Knows the songs pretty well and thinks this means that their child doesn't need to hear them anymore.
Classical Listening	Chooses a few classical songs to play for a week at a time; creates a new playlist each week. Puts reminders in their phone to make new music choices each Sunday evening. Plays the classical station on the car radio with the child, and gets ideas for music to explore next.	Forgets to do classical listening unless reminded by the teacher. Starts a listening routine, but doesn't put any reminders in their calendar and quickly forgets. Plays exclusively pop music in the car with the child, or talks on the phone.
Daily Practice	Chooses a regular time each day for violin practice. Schedule other activities thoughtfully, making sure there's still room for violin practice that day.	Practices with the child whenever they have time. Doesn't worry too much if other responsibilities and activities interfere with violin practice.
During Violin Lessons	Creates a dedicated lesson notebook and brings it to each lesson. Gives their undivided attention to the violin lesson, and writes detailed notes on each teaching point.	Forgets to create a lesson notebook; writes lesson notes on scraps of paper, which then get lost. Writes notes once in a while (when the teacher requests it); spends the rest of time in online chat.
During Home Practice	Stays in the room during home practice, and gives their child their full attention. Comes to each home practice with clear ideas for the focus of practice, and ways to make it interesting for the child.	Lets their child practice on their own, checking occasionally to make sure they're "doing okay." Listens from the next room, and yells "Good job" every so often (because it's good to be involved in your child's practice).
Posture	Understands each posture point fully before leaving lesson. Observes their child closely during home practice, striving for perfect posture at all times.	Figures that the teacher will fix any posture mistakes, so doesn't worry too much. Asks the child if their posture is good. If the child says, "yes," then it's okay.
Learning & Progress	Encourages the child to figure it out themselves, rather than giving the answers. Understands that mistakes and forgetting are a part of the natural learning process. Appreciates that each child's pace and development is unique.	Tells the child where all the notes are (it's faster than having them figure it out). Makes a face when the child misses a note. Says, "Why did you miss that note? You played it correctly yesterday!" Assumes their child's progress is up to the child.
Positive Feedback	Suggests an area of focus before each play-through, so the student can be successful. Invites the child's self-observation after each play-through, rather than correcting them. "Catches" the child doing something well, and offers positive reinforcement.	Forgets to set focus areas before the play-through, but critiques the child's playing afterwards. Assumes the child's self-observation is unreliable; it's easier to just tell them what they did wrong. Forgets to praise what the child did correctly; fixing what's wrong is more important.
Correcting Posture	Collaborates with the child in choosing a specific posture goal for each repetition. Uses gentle physical corrections whenever possible, rather than verbal feedback.	Directs every element of the practice, since the child is too young to make decisions. Tells the child, "Get your violin up!" "Open from the elbow!" etc. while they're playing.

What to Cover During Your Lessons with Parents

First Lesson: Tuning, Bowhold & Fingering

The parents should come to their first lesson with a full size violin (borrowed or rented) if possible. Sixty minutes is always better for the first lesson, since there is so much to cover. For the later lessons, 45 minutes will generally be fine.

I treat the first lesson as I would the first lesson with an adult who is learning violin. This includes the following:

- Using a chromatic tuner; working the pegs and fine tuners
- Making the bowhold on a pencil
- “Flapping the wings” (extending and re-curving the bow pinky)
- “Tai chi bunny” — an exercise I created for raising and lowering the bowhold to learn the wrist position the tip and frog.
- Fitting the violin under the chin
- Left-hand position
- Playing a scale in pizzicato.

Their first-week assignment is to make 20 bowholds a day (five sessions), practice the scale, and begin playing the repertoire recording daily in the home. The child will often enjoy watching their parent practice the violin, and may even enjoy being their “posture helper.”

Next Lesson: Playing with the Bow

At the beginning of the second lesson I ask the parents how their practice went, and if they were able to listen daily. That first week was the beginning of adjusting their time to accommodate the addition of violin practice in their schedule, and this is my first opportunity to support them in this new routine.

Next we check their bowhold and make any needed adjustments. If they are ready we move to the next step: putting the bow to the violin. Some parents need quite a lot more work on the bowhold and Wing Flapping, so are not ready to move to the next step, in which case we wait till the following week.

Assuming they are ready, I cover the following:

- Practicing on a “bow slide.” This is a dowel wrapped with a 3” paper sleeve, which they slide up and down to simulate the path of the bow.
- Then we make a bowhold on the bow itself.

- Next, I demonstrate “Peanut Brittle,” a bowing pattern with four ▢ hooked bows. They play this pattern on the top three open strings.
- They play their scale and we check their left-hand position.

During the coming week, they should practice all of the first-week assignments plus whatever additional material was introduced.

Two More Lessons: Bowing & Songs

At the beginning of the next lesson I check to make sure they are doing the daily listening and ask how their own practicing went.

We follow up on the existing assignments, and I show them how to do the Peanut Brittle pattern on a scale. As with any beginner, it takes most of the lesson to refine their bowing and various posture details.

Next we might learn another bowing pattern (also on a scale) and perhaps a short song. I use Hot Cross Buns and Let Us Chase the Squirrel, which are easier than Twinkle.

As part of their homework, I ask them to begin reading the parent guide which accompanies their repertoire book.

Preparing for the Child to Begin

At the final lesson we talk what will be coming up as their child begins lessons. I let them know that the most important thing for them to know about home practice is that it works best if it is daily (and the reasons for this). I let them know that their first responsibility is to ensure the practice is as enjoyable for both them and their child, because this means their child will always look forward to it tomorrow.

We talk a bit about their responsibility for taking notes at lesson; I tell them that if they write down pretty much everything I say, they’ll be in good shape.

Last, I remind them of my cell phone policy, acknowledging that this is hard for all of us! But in the time that it takes for them to answer a quick email, they may easily miss an important point of the lesson. For this reason I ask that they use a paper-based notebook. This also helps them to put their cell phone away when they practice with their child.

With these items covered, they are ready to be an amazing practice parent!