

Guidelines for Creating a Parent Triangle for Suzuki Lessons – From Parents as Partners, Winter 2011

Parents, teachers and students are all equally important for success in a child's learning to play an instrument. The Suzuki approach isn't magic. It takes lots of hard work on the part of all parts of the Suzuki Triangle. It is a step by step process that builds attention to beauty, tone, expression, position, work habits, communication channels etc. Suzuki children are truly "Nurtured by Love".

Child: Children want to accomplish things by magic and wishing. They don't see that hard work is necessary for success. The teacher and parent need to show them that step by step they will achieve their goals if they work at it regularly, review consistently, listen like a maniac, never hurry and never rest. It is OK to struggle as long as they are guided in their struggles by a parent who is sympathetic and supportive and diligent.

Parents: Struggle along with child. Give them choices: "How many times do you want to play this, 4 or 6". Give them specific praise: "Remember when this was so hard for you? When did it become easy!" or "I like how hard you are working on this measure" or "The way you are going is right on target"; Resist telling the child they are talented or great. These adjectives cause the child to be anxious about letting you down. Be present at the lesson and sit close. Take detailed notes on what the teacher is assigning, understand what is expected, and be sure to work on these parts at home. Clarify any misunderstandings before leaving the lesson. Observe quietly in the lesson and watch how the teacher interacts with your child. Take a picture or make a video of things you are not sure you can remember. In the lesson observe how many times your teacher asks for a clear sound or a round thumb or a tilted bow. Avoid the word "NO". Choose positive reinforcement words instead. Supervise review. Help your child pick out one thing to concentrate on in his review and work on that in every review piece (ringing tone, intonation on certain notes, correct articulation of the bow, posture, round fingers, bow hold, the thinking point for the week etc). Listen like a maniac to the current piece and next piece. The parents should know if the child is playing the piece correctly.

Teachers: Assign small parts of pieces and the number of times these parts should be repeated. Be sure the parent and child know what to work on in these parts. Expect review and listening at home.

Practice Ideas for new pieces: Let the child decide with a "yes" or "no" if they have accomplished a goal. Ask them if their bow was "inside the highway" or "Were your fingers on the tapes?" Depersonalize the suggestions with, "Tell your arm what to do". Apply counter pressure to a sagging "wing" or "raised bow arm" to have the student lean against your pressure in the direction you want him to go.

1. The teacher should highlight the spots to be practiced and the special notes to be worked on. Indicate the number of times they are to be practiced each day in a square next to the highlighted part. Parents should see that this is practiced as the teacher says.
2. Make it fun: a. Practice in different locations like bathrooms, bedrooms, outside etc. b. Put a piece in a puzzle when a certain number of pieces are played. c. Light a candle and blow it out at the end of

the practice. d. Attend group lessons, e. Use Practice partners. f. Play the penny game – get a penny for each 3 pieces you play well. g. Ask other parents for suggestions.

3. Learn how to communicate in a non-verbal way. An example of non-verbal communication is the Nike swoosh with the words “Just do it” beneath. People don’t like to be told that to do. Students can make themselves their own “Nike sign” to remind them of some “umbrella item” such as a bent thumb. Encourage students to think for themselves.

4. Use a deck of cards. Since cards have numbers and colors, you can use them in different ways. Some suggestions follow: a. You can lay down a card every time the students plays something well, every note that rings in a tonalization, if the bow is straight, if the child’s eyes are on the bow etc. b. You can use the cards Ace to 3 for a piece with four sections. Pull out a card and the child plays that section. There will be 4 repetitions with the 4 suites on the cards. On longer pieces, use more cards for the additional sections. c. Put out cards A – 10 for dynamic levels. d. Put out cards A – 5 for “lanes” for bow placement between the bridge and fingerboard.

5. Ring a bell – Ring it if there is a problem. Let the child ring it if there is no problem.

6. Use pictures of Happy Face for something done well.

7. Use a stuffed animal to inspect the bow hand or position on the instrument.

8. The Value of Serendipity: The Parent is not making all the decisions on what is to be practiced. The child feels he has control over the practice. Use a plastic bag containing descriptions of what is to be practiced such as ringing tone, bent thumb, tall back, highway, dynamics, articulation, vibrato, etc. For review, pick the name of review pieces out of another bag

9. Steps across the floor: For each good repetition, move forward across the floor one step. If both parent and child agree there was a problem, the child goes back 1 step. If there is disagreement, he stays put. For cello, try putting out a game board such as monopoly and moving a game piece for each successful repetition. Try to get around the game board.

Review Ideas: It takes 10,000 repetitions to learn something well. Many Americans do not learn to speak a foreign language well because they do not practice it regularly. Music is like language. Babies practice words over and over until they master them, then continue to use them all their lives. My son Jon lived in Mexico and spoke Spanish fluently at age 6. Later, a he had to start over again at age 15 because he had not practiced it between age 6 and 15 and had forgotten what he used to know.

a. Roll dice – the number of dots is the number of repetitions to do

b. Draw numbers from a deck of cards for repetitions. You can manage the numbers on the cards.

c. Use cups and marbles. Transfer marbles from one cup to the other when your get “yes” for an answer. Try to fill the cup.

1. The Work Out: Pick one idea to work on such as intonation, posture, straight wrist, tone, vibrato etc. Set a time frame from 3 minutes to 15 minutes. For example, start with Twinkle Variations and play with excellent intonation through each Variation. If there is a problem, student or parent can stop the play and go back and make it right. If that piece is OK, go to the next one until all are played right up to the current piece. Stop at the end of the time frame and resume the next day with the same skill until the student has played all the pieces up to the current piece.

2. Keep track of repetitions in a way that helps everybody stay alert and engaged such a 100's Spiral, beads on a skewer, or build a tower of blocks.

Listening Ideas:

1. Listen like a Maniac. Listen to the new piece at least 10 times in a row. Listen to the next piece 10 times in a row. Be able to sing the piece and understand the sections of the piece. How many section. Are any the same? How are they different. Know when the notes skip up and down and go up and down in a scale.

Different kinds of listening:

1. Passive listening – the music is in the background: You absorb tone and intonation. You should be able to sing the piece.

2. Parallel listening – Listening to future pieces such as Book 4 pieces while in Book 1 and other music. It can all be helpful, except Rap music which doesn't have tonality.

3. Active listening – Targeted listening to hear 1 aspect of the music such as slurs, form, repeats, articulation

Listening skills include

1. Being able to hear if the note is the same or different

2. When the notes are different, is the 2nd note higher or lower?

3. Understanding the logic of the instrument. On the piano, the higher notes are to the right, the lower notes are to the left. Strings are not so intuitive since we are crossing strings to get to higher notes.

4. Internalize the song

5. When these things are accomplished, the parent can give the students the freedom to use trial and error to explore the songs. After supervising review and preparatory exercises, let them explore playing the new piece (after starting them on the right note). Don't spoon-feed them the notes. Let them discover the notes.

The Listening loop: Get the concept in the brain, the actions in the body, analyze the sounds and adjust.

Breaking Bad Habits: Teri Einfeldt. Q: *What are your ideas for breaking bad habits with violin playing? For example, my oldest—I have 3 children that play violin—doesn't like to bow to the frog or do big bows. It really hampers her dynamics. My littlest squeezes the violin with his thumb which often causes a bent wrist. And lastly, my middle child usually has issues with her bow hand by not holding it properly, and then her bow hand moves up on the bow or she drops it all together. Other than practicing these "bad" habits over and over, I wondered if you have any other suggestions or motivational techniques?*

A: Have you heard the joke, "What do a good bed and a bad habit have in common?" The answer is, "They are both easy to get into and hard to get out of." Whether it is in violin playing or another aspect of life, breaking a bad habit is challenging no matter the habit or one's age.

The best thing we can do is raise consciousness in the child before attempting a task that will exhibit this habit. Whether you are working on left thumbs, bow holds, or getting to the frog, at every practice session, try devoting a portion of your review time to restructuring these habits. Choose a piece, scale, tonalization, or just a few selected notes, and announce before the child starts playing what it is both of you should focus on. Also state that when he or she finishes playing, you will ask for her opinion as to whether the goal was accomplished. By bringing her attention to the idea before it happens, it will prevent yet another reinstatement of the bad habit and reinforce the right way to progress.

Making the child more responsible for the outcome by directing her attention before playing—but not to more than one point per piece—will bring about more far reaching results. Good luck!