



Supporting your child with instrumental playing at home

Learning an instrument is a bit like getting a pet, not like most other extracurricular activities as it must be tended to every day. Children train their muscle memory through repetition.

The children have extremely high quality individual lessons at HHJS but in order to get the most out of them your child will also need support at home.

Where and when

- Call it 'playing time' not 'practice time'
- Together, choose a regular place and time for practice, it does not need to be a quiet place but a music stand is useful so that good posture can be achieved. It needs to become a routine habit like brushing teeth or doing homework.
- Aim for 5 sessions a week of at least 10 minutes, building to 20-30 minutes by Grade 1. Using a timer at the start of practice is often useful.

How to support?

As a parent, your main point of reference to support the practice is the **Practice Notebook**. You should help your child to follow exactly what the teacher has asked them to do. Decide together at the beginning of the practice what you want to achieve. Ideally each thing should be repeated slowly several times (the Russian method is 10 times over!).

Learning a piece of music is best done in small steps, starting at a very slow speed as the muscle memory is developed.

1. Break it down into tiny sections, perhaps clapping the rhythm before you play it, and repeat each section alone several times, gradually adding them together and speeding up until things become easier.
2. It can also be a good strategy to break the piece into chunks at the beginning of the week after a lesson and designate one chunk for each practice so that it is complete by the next lesson. This way your child will also be encouraged by how much repetition there is in the actual music, often the same notes and patterns repeat themselves.
3. It is also really good practice to start a piece half way through as that really tests their notereading rather than memory – you could turn this into a game.

Once you have done 10 minutes or so of targeted practice together then your child can enjoy some unsupervised free playing time to play the music they already know.

Parent's musical skills

- You do not have to be able to read music to be a good practice supporter, in fact your child will enjoy having this special knowledge and teaching it to you. The children use a musical language in school called Kodaly and the rhythms (the patterns of sound) all have special

names. Clapping the music before you play it is always a good strategy to find the tune accurately.

- Reading the pitch (high and low sounds) in music is also a new challenge, we work on this in school, but in the end, like learning times tables, it is purely a memorising skill and flash cards can be fun! Naming the notes in the section of music you are focussing on is always a good idea.
- One of the most helpful things you can do is to help your child keep the beat steady, by gently and slowly tapping the beat yourself sometimes, this will also ensure that the rhythm is accurate. Online metronomes (on a phone or tablet) are also really handy.
- Using a mirror is very helpful for the child to self-assess posture and embouchure.
- Recording parts of their practice and then asking them to listen and self-assess what needs to happen next is a great way of the child taking ownership of their practice.
- Lots of praise for trying hard no matter what it sounds like!
- Try to attend some of their lessons in school if you can as it will give you extra insight in how to support

If your child is in Ensembles they should also want to practise that music to check that they are comfortable with reading and playing the notes.

Reluctance to practice

I had a conversation with a child last year who told me he would have to give up playing his instrument because he didn't ever really feel like practising. I asked him if he thought this feeling was normal or a bit odd, 'Well, it's a bit odd, isn't it,' was his reply! We then had a long conversation about how it would probably be more unusual for a child to willingly practice every day with no reminders or incentives when there are so many less effortful activities.

It can take until a child is at least 11 years old or until they have reached about Grade 4 before they see the point of practice. Some days are tougher than others but the aim is to eventually give the child ownership of their learning with a sense of responsibility that leads to self-motivation and routine. Leaving the instrument out in an accessible place (a cello stand, for example) also takes away the barrier of unpacking a case each time. Joining ensembles is an excellent way for children to want to get better as they see what fun it is to play with others, whereas practice at home is rarely fun!

Incentives

Devising some sort of incentive scheme, either linked to pocket money, or another daily incentive, perhaps screen time is probably the only way most children will cooperate. As the parent, we can see the bigger picture and having invested in an instrument and lessons, encouraging them to keep going when it seems hard will be an ongoing job, that may sometimes lead to a few cross or frustrated tears... But they will grow up knowing what it is to truly achieve something and how to motivate themselves to do something they might not always want to do.

Advantages of regular practice

- Encouraging progress, moving on to new pieces and not getting stuck on the same one
- Being ready to take music exams
- Joining Ensembles is the real bonus of regular practice
- playing solos in concerts and recitals
- Enjoyment for the whole family, even playing together as a family

- A sense of true achievement and understanding of music
- Playing becomes much more fun as you get better and more confident!