

5 Ways to Get the Most Out of Music Lessons

These guidelines may help you to determine the appropriate type of music education program for you and your family. The goal is to ensure that you have a successful, rewarding experience learning music.

1. STARTING THE RIGHT PROGRAM AT THE RIGHT TIME

Early Childhood Music – 3 to 6 year olds

These programs have a specially designed curriculum for children and the graduates of this program tend to be highly successful in future musical skill building. Class activities include songs, singing games, instrument playing, short listening exercises, tonal and rhythm patterns, and movement. Research shows that early music experiences open the learning connections to the brain. The same connections that carry music information carry math and science information. Although higher IQ or academic test scores may not be our goal, it is certainly a benefit for all children to have these learning capabilities tapped to their greatest potential. Our Performing Arts Preschool (Musical Arts Schoolhouse) offers daily music, art, dance and theatre classes along with academics.

Group Lessons – 4 to 11 year olds (piano, guitar, voice), plus age 12 and up (guitar)

This is an excellent setting for introducing children to the fundamentals of music. Most importantly, students should be allowed to progress at their own pace (take their time or move ahead in the materials) within the group setting. Students learn how to read music, understand rhythm and learn about musical phrasing and character while participating in a fun group music-making experience. Knowing these basics will greatly enhance other instrumental study as well. Students should be able to focus and work on their own during parts of the class since the teacher visits each student individually. Look for a small class size. The teacher can recommend when private lessons are appropriate for the child.

Private Lessons – Private Instruction

Students who want a more detailed home assignment and want to participate in solo recitals and concerts should choose private lessons. For children, starting at the right age for each child is a key element to the success of the beginner, regardless of the instrument. If a child is put into private lessons too soon, they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated and want to stop. The last thing you want to do is turn a child off to music just because they had one unpleasant experience that could have been prevented. Students can be successful at music whether they start at elementary, middle or high school ages. Parent support at lessons and during the home practice sessions is required. Look for teachers who use creative artistic materials and present musical ideas in a positive and motivating way. Quality teachers will provide many opportunities for performance (recitals, festivals, contests) throughout the year.

Adults – It's Never Too Late

Adults can start lessons at any time. Their success is based on how willing one is to commit to practicing and attending the weekly lessons. Building a skill takes time—give yourself 9 to 12 months to see significant results. Look for a program that will not just encourage you to learn your favorite songs, but help you understand how music is put together. Believe it or not, understanding the basics goes a long way toward making music success easier.

- PIANO/KEYBOARD

At our school, we start piano at age 4. At this age children are developing a longer attention span and can retain material with ease.

- GUITAR – Acoustic, Electric, Bass

We start guitar at age 6 for private lessons and age 7 for group classes (student size instrument). Guitar playing requires a fair amount of pressure on the fingertips from pressing on the strings. Children under 6 generally have smaller hands and may find playing uncomfortable. Bass guitar students are usually 10 years old and up.

- VOICE LESSONS

Our singing lessons for young children are very age appropriate. We start private lessons at age 6 and our group singers' class at age 7.

- DRUMS

Our youngest drum student is 6 years old. This depends on the size of the child, since they need to be able to reach both the pedals and the cymbals.

- **FLUTE, CLARINET, SAXOPHONE, TRUMPET**

Due to lung capacity (and in the case of the saxophone, the size of the instrument) we recommend that most beginners are 8 years old and up. Young flute students can use a curved mouthpiece to make it easy for them to hold the instrument. Trumpet requires physical exertion and lung power, so 9 years and older is a good age to start.

- **VIOLIN/VIOLA/CELLO**

We accept string students starting at age 4, with the correct size student instrument. Cello students need a bit larger hand, so starting at age 8 is better for cello.

2. TAKE LESSONS IN A PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Learning music is not just a matter of having a qualified teacher and a quality instrument, but also having an environment that is focused on music education. In a professional school environment a student cannot be distracted by TV, pets, phone calls, siblings, etc. A professional school environment can produce better results since the only focus at that time is learning music, and students are motivated by hearing peers who are at different levels, and are exposed to a variety of teaching styles. In a music school, the lessons are not a hobby or side-line for the teacher, but a career responsibility which is taken very seriously, by both teacher AND student.

4. MAKING PRACTICE EASIER

As with anything, improving in music takes practice. One of the main concerns heard from students and families is that practicing can become repetitive and unexciting. Don't we want our children to learn that giving effort will get them rewards? Here are some ways to make practicing more successful.

TIME: Set the same time every day to practice so it becomes part of a routine habit. Generally the earlier in the day the practicing can occur, the less reminding is required by parents to get the student to practice. Also, breaking up the practice period into two 15-minute increments (morning and evening) can be very successful, especially for young students.

REPETITION: Try this method when setting practice schedules for beginners: For some students 20-30 minutes seems like an eternity. Instead of setting a time frame, use repetition. For example, "practice this piece 4 times every day, and this scale 5 times a day." This way, the student does not pay attention to the amount of time they are practicing, but knows that if they are on repetition number 3 they are almost finished.

REWARDS: This works very well for both children and adult students. For example, some adults reward themselves after a successful week of practicing. Parents can encourage children by granting them occasional rewards for successful practicing. Some students earn stickers and stars. Also, yearly achievement programs where students earn ribbons, certificates, medals and trophies can be a great incentive. Praise tends to be the most coveted award—there is just no substitute for a pat on the back for a job well done!

When seeking an instructor or a music school situation, ask about their practice-building methods. Learning an instrument takes the dedication of more than just the student.

5. MOST IMPORTANTLY—HAVE FUN!

Music should be something that you enjoy for a lifetime. So, try not to put unrealistic expectations on yourself or your children to learn too quickly. There are always ups and downs to learning a new skill. The most important thing is to be willing to persevere through the plateaus; and, enjoy the musical experience!