

Creative Practice

Once you have established a practice routine and practice patterns, begin to experiment. Look for creative ways to make practice interesting, challenging and fun. Try to remember we "play" the violin, we don't "work" the violin. Choose a creative practice idea and use it for a few days. Tap into your child's personality and your own.

Change the practice environment.

- Change direction your child usually faces as they play.
- Change practice place and move to a different room in your house.
- Change venues completely.
 - The empty church sanctuary after services
 - The stairway at the school where lessons are held
 - The bathroom with its great acoustics
 - The porch or the patio
- Practice by candlelight or in the dark.

Change visual or aural focus.

- Practice watching in a mirror.
- Watch! "Watch me. Watch the bow. Watch your fingers."
- Close your eyes and listen.
- Practice left hand finger motions and no bow.
- Practice with the bow and no fingers.
- Practice "inside" your brain at one signal and practice "outside" on another signal.

Play with someone else or something else.

- Play with the metronome.
- Play with the accompaniment tape.
- Play with SmartMusic accompaniment on the computer.
- Play with a pianist.
- Invite a Suzuki friend over and practice and play together.

Change how a well know piece is played.

- Change the style of a piece.
 - "Play a slow easy piece quickly with short bows."
- Change the tempo.
 - "Play a fast piece slowly and a slow piece quickly."
- Change the mood of a piece.
 - "Play Allegro in a grumpy fashion.... Now try it in a dreamy way."

Add a technical challenge.

- Play a major piece in minor key.
- Play all the bowings backwards.
- Play an easy piece in a different position. -Play all down bows at the frog.

Practice with a recording device; a tape recorder, computer or video camera.

- Watch and/or listen for feedback.
- Choose a single point and film in close-up.
- Make a tape for a purpose: a gift for grandma tape, an annual birthday recording, a graduation or recital tape.
- Make a tape for fun.

Change who is in charge.

- Put all the practice tasks in a basket and let child choose,
- Let your child see the practice list and have them choose the playing order.
- Let your child choose a practice point, let them evaluate and decide what to do next. -Ask your child to teach you a point or piece.

Don't watch their practice: listen.

- Close your eyes
 - Listen for the correct bowing, lifts and slurs!
 - Try to recognize your child's tone in a group.
 - Raise your hand if your child's bow moves away from the bridge.

Don't say a word.

- Use props, hand signals, facial expressions etc. to give your child feedback.

Play games, all sorts.

- Counting games
 - Abacus Counts: Slide beads back and forth to keep count.
 - Lego stacks: Stack a Lego for each repetition. Keep the stack growing.
 - 10 pennies or candies on the counter...
 - If you do the spot well, you get one. If you miss, I get one.
 - Play until you have all the pennies.

-Guessing games

- Can you guess it? Can you play it?
 - "I am thinking of a piece that starts on up bow E."
 - "I am thinking of a piece written by a man named Johannes."
 - "I am thinking of a piece that was Dr. Suzuki's favorite in Book Five."

-Challenge games

- Game of 20. If you play a repetition correctly you get a point. If you miss you lose a point. Play until 20.
- Seven up. Try to do 7 perfect shifts or any other technical practice point. If you miss one add 7 more. 7 correct repetitions for each miss.

Play a concert for someone else.

- Arrange a concert for someone else, grandma, the neighbors.
- Invite an older child who plays the instrument to practice with your child.
- If your baby-sitter plays, ask if they can include a practice session as part of an evening.
- Arrange a short concert for your child's class at school.

Practicing every day with your child is a huge commitment. It can be delightful, challenging, frustrating and incredibly rewarding. If it doesn't go well, forgive everyone involved, especially yourself. Give everyone a hug and try again tomorrow. You are the help that makes Suzuki learning consistent, easier, more thorough and hopefully more fun. You are what makes Suzuki education truly special. I have never had an adult say to me, "I am sorry my parents helped me learn to play an instrument." ☺

Winifred Crock is the orchestra director at Parkway Central High School. She also maintains a private violin studio in suburban St. Louis, MO. Winifred holds music degrees from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and Kent State University. She also graduated from the Suzuki Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan and earned Kodaly Certification from the Kodaly Center of America in Boston. Winifred has received the Parkway School District Pillar of Parkway Award, the St. Louis Suburban Music Educators' Merit Award, the Missouri ASTA Studio Teacher of the Year Award and was selected for the 1998 "USA Today" National Teacher Team. Winifred began teaching privately 25 years ago and in the public schools 18 years ago.