

**Redefining Practice:  
An Instructor’s Guide to Helping Music Students & Their Parents  
Achieve More Meaningful Outcomes**

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Practicing a musical instrument, and the expectation of what practice means, can be different for instructors, students, and their parents. With different possible expectations of practice, it is important for instructors to clearly define expectations for their students and parents to ensure a clear understanding for everyone. Practice can be broken down into two categories: *Skill Development* and *Experience Practice*.

Skill Development Practice - Anything that is new and/or challenging for your student. This can be new techniques, notes, chords, scales, parts of songs, etc. Skill Development practice is anything that you are working on in that particular lesson that you’d like to see your student start to feel more comfortable with. This is usually more challenging for students and typically requires more focus. Additionally, and also important to consider, this category of practice has higher potential to cause frustration with students. Progress rarely comes from frustration, so take care when assigning and monitoring Skill Development Practice.

Experience Practice - Anything that your student has learned in past lessons or on their own that they enjoy playing. This can be a song, part of a song, a chord progression, etc. Experience Practice keeps students' existing skills sharp and builds confidence. Experience Practice pieces are a great way to “measure backwards” – showing a student how much they have already mastered. This can be a tremendous inspiration for students as a comparison for current challenges, while at the same time celebrating their progress. (Examples of Experience Practice are listed below in the section **10 ENGAGEMENT AND ENRICHMENT ASSIGNMENTS**.)

Each of your students will need different ratios of Skill Development Practice and Experience Practice, and those ratios may also change over time. A very ambitious student may enjoy being challenged and prefer more Skill Development Practice. For a student who is more easily frustrated, too much focus on Skill Development Practice may actually prevent them from improving. As an instructor, you will have the best insight for each of your students and understand the best ratio of Skill Development and Experience Practice for each student.

It is important that parents also understand the difference between the two types of practice, and more importantly that Experience Practice *counts* as practice, as it is commonly overlooked. Communicate and explain this to your students and their parents often. In the next section, **Answering the Parent Question: “How much time should my child spend practicing?”**, we expand even further what should “count” as practice, and how too much focus on Skill Development Practice can actually backfire and cause kids and parents to quit lessons. The

broader your understanding of practice, the more flexibility and freedom you have in assigning practice that will best help your student at different points in their learning process.

### **Answering the Parent Question: “How much time should my child spend practicing?”**

Probably the most common question instructors receive from parents is, “how many minutes per day should my child practice?”

The “minutes per day” practice concept makes parents feel comfortable because it is quantifiable. It gives them a measurable goal from which they can expect results when that goal is met. “If my 10 year old practices piano for 20 minutes per day, they will continually improve their skills on piano.” This concept is sound, but not realistic. For one, it doesn’t take into consideration plateaus in learning. But worse, it is a recipe for burnout for the student. Yes, there is a time and place for laser-focused repetition to improve skills, and drill concepts (Skill Development Practice), but there is more to success in learning an instrument. The key is the student’s engagement in the content. If the student is not engaged in the content of their practice, then those minutes per day may not lead to any improvement at all.

How does this look in other activities?

In kids’ baseball it is common to see players focus on many aspects of the game during team practice. Warm-ups and stretching, batting practice, sprinting drills, throwing and catching, scrimmages, etc. Most of those activities kids do not actually practice at home. They may play casual pickup games, practice a few skills they are most interested in, watch games on TV, or maybe read about some favorite players. All of those things contribute to their overall engagement with baseball. Those things outside of team practice are IMPORTANT. Those things continually feed a child’s desire to learn more about baseball and PLAY more baseball. Most parents view that as success! When their child enjoys the activity and wants to participate in the activity. It is the rare instance where parents are tracking the number of minutes per day that their child is doing sprinting drills at home, and in those instances it is generally the more serious players. The players that excel at the sport and are driven to improve.

So why do we view “minutes per day” practicing as a measure of success in music? It could be because it has simply become a standard, expected answer. Or maybe parents (and instructors) simply don’t have another way to think about it. What “counts” as practice, then?

We need to find the musical equivalent. We need to also focus attention on those aspects of music and continually feed a child’s desire to learn and PLAY more music. Following is a list of activities that promote a student’s engagement with music, and should “count” as practice.

### **10 ENGAGEMENT AND ENRICHMENT ASSIGNMENTS**

Use this list of 10 assignments for your students that are not traditional “practice.” All are designed to inspire and engage students to explore music.

1. Have your student choose a song or piece of music that they already know and love to play. Include that as part of their practice for the week. Additional fun and engaging aspects to add:

- Keep track of how many times they play the piece through the week
  - Change it using different dynamics: faster, slower, louder, softer, etc.
2. Have your student choose a song or piece of music they already know and love to play, then plan for them to host a “concert” for family or friends at some point during the week. The “concert” can be informal, in-person, via zoom/facetime (great for grandparents!), etc.
  3. Have your student learn something new (a song, part of a song, video game jingle, chords, scales, etc.) of their choosing from YouTube. It can literally be anything that you have NOT done in lessons. The following week they should tell and/or play for you what they learned.
  4. Have your student find a new song or artist, then share that new song/artist with you the following week. Did they like it, dislike it, reasons why, etc. They can:
    - Get recommendations/suggestions from family or friends
    - Explore on streaming apps (Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, etc.)
  5. Have your student listen to five random songs (shuffle mode on streaming apps, or curated playlists are great for this) and rate them “best” to “worst.” Have them share their list and discuss it at their next lesson.
  6. Have your student go to a concert, recital, live performance, or watch a live performance video of their choosing. Possibly the student’s favorite artist/musician. Have them tell you about the details the following week.
  7. Have your student ask a parent or friend: Who is your favorite musician? What is your favorite song? Then the student should listen to that song. Discuss what your student learned the following lesson.
  8. Have your student choose a musician, instrument, or any music-related topic to read about, watch YouTube videos, or otherwise learn about during the week. Have your student share what they learned at their next lesson.
  9. Have your students write their own music. They can write a song, part of a song, a simple melody, a commercial jingle for their favorite game, or anything else. They can write on their own instrument, using loops on an app like GarageBand, write lyrics for a song, or anything else that allows them to create and explore. Have them share what they created at their next lesson.
  10. If access allows, have your student play or try to play any musical instrument besides the instrument they are studying (example: piano student playing ukulele).

WORKSHEET

Use the worksheet below as inspiration to start conversations with your students and parents about redefining practice.

**Answering the Parent Question: “How much time should my child spend practicing?”**

Name 3-5 activities (not practice) in your life that you feel have helped you grow as a musician, or have fueled your desire to learn more about your instrument. Be specific.

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Name 3-5 areas where focused practice and repetition were important to see progress in your own playing, or to break a plateau. With each, estimate how long you had been playing/studying your instrument in those instances.

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From your experiences above, which of them do you feel might be most beneficial to share with a student and/or parent? Choose one from your non-practice activities and one from your focused practice situations.

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