

To Bribe or Not to Bribe? How Pro Suzuki Parents Motivate Their Kids to Practice

by Brecklyn Ferrin

How Pro Suzuki Parents Get Their Kids to Practice: Part I

Practicing. Ugh. We teachers are always struggling to get our students to practice, and to teach them how to practice properly. Parents are always struggling to fit it in, to remove the obstacles, and to make it not such a fight with their kids. Some parents are doing it though. They're defying the odds, and making it happen. I wondered how on earth they did it.

How do they get their kids to practice consistently and make progress?

I have been hesitant to suggest much about practicing to parents in my studio. I don't have a child that I am practicing with yet, (my oldest is not even three). I can barely get a shower in, how can I suggest that parents add even more to their very full plates? I don't even know how they leave the house by themselves if they have more than two kids. (I still haven't gone to the grocery store alone with my two boys. Every time I think about trying, I burst out laughing and call my mom.) I will say, before I had kids of my own, I had lots of ideas on how to get kids to practice. Ha.

I figured I better go straight to the experts. In my research for this blog post I heard from almost twenty parents. I asked them for their top tips on motivating their kids to practice, and how they find time to help their kids to practice. Their answers all seemed to fall into pretty neatly organized categories. Even so, there was so much material, and so many amazing ideas, that I had to break it up. So it's going to be a series! Part I of the "How Pro Suzuki Parents get their Kids to Practice" Series is all about routines. **Almost every single parent talked about making music practice part of your family routine.**

We all hear about the importance of routines. Everyone spouts how vital they are for productivity, focus, and happiness as adults. Every baby book talks in some way about getting your baby on a routine. Every toddler thrives on routines, and balks when they are changed, even if only slightly. It shouldn't be surprising that one of the most effective ways to ensure music practice is to make it a part of your daily routine.

I want to share these ideas with you in their own words. It's kind of a long post, so if you are short on time, just read the parts in bold!

Julia Margaret Nichols says, **"I never really thought about it as "finding" time for practice – it was just always a part of our everyday routine. When my kids were younger, I always tried to choose a time that I knew would work for them (often after a meal or snack because I know my kids get cranky with no food!). As they grew older and our routines changed, we allowed the time to change, as needed."**

I thought that making sure that the kiddos were always fed beforehand was an especially good idea! It helps me to have a snack too.

Kadre Sneddon says, **"Finding time is a constant challenge (5 young violinists), and so violin has been made a priority. My husband jokes that nothing else may happen, but the violin gets done! If I can't practice with the kids, my husband does a "review concert" with them, which they enjoy. We practice every day except Sunday, and it just gets done, even if it is quick and a bit of review. They are happy with the routine."**

I think many of us have a tendency of thinking of things in all or nothing terms. It's only worth doing if we can do a full hour, or get to every practice assignment. This isn't true at all! (Nor is it helpful.) It is much more effective to be consistent than to practice everything on one day and then be too burnt out to get the violin out for the next few days. Practicing a little bit every day is much better than a two hours once a week. If you are limited on time, focusing on review is especially fantastic. The review pieces are where the progress is really happening, and it is so encouraging and fun to play pieces you already have polished. If you are pressed for time, practicing something that will be easily successful will bring a sense of accomplishment, rather than struggling for ten minutes on a new piece, only to finish feeling unfulfilled.

Obviously, I think my mom is the best Suzuki parent out there, so I asked her for her advice, and she said the same thing! Norene Smith says, **"The best way to find time to practice is to make it an everyday part of the routine. We get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, practice, etc. It is easier to be consistent if we make practicing part of a routine. Children do better with a familiar routine where they know what to expect."** My Mom has been a Suzuki parent for twenty-two years and is still going strong with my youngest sister and brother.

Angela Yantorno has a similar view, she says, **“In our house it’s just what we do.. We practice, we read, we clean.. It’s a choice we have made and our kids are in the routine with it.”** If it doesn’t happen every day, children will balk. Why does it have to happen today when we didn’t do it yesterday or the day before?

Alan Duncan, a Suzuki dad who has been practicing with his seven-year-old for four years says this, **“In a way, I feel like you have to pay your dues up-front. By being 100% committed to do whatever it takes to make sure practice happens every day, you take a lot of flack early-on; but you have an easier time later once the habit is established. We also decided to make practice an every day affair. I know that some families have schedules that are too busy or chaotic to make that work—this is just our experience. There’s a point in early childhood where kids become very focused on fairness and doing things properly. If you set up a daily practice habit, then the idea of missing a day seems out of the question. They sense something wrong about it.”**

Alan blogs about his experience as a Suzuki parent at [The Suzuki Experience](#), it is a wonderful resource for teachers and parents.

Practicing is that million dollar question. As a parent, you struggle to make it happen. You have so much on your plate. My babies are only little, but now I’ve got a little peek into your world, and I’m just amazed you made it to lessons with both violin and child. As teachers, we struggle to know how we can help. We know life is crazy, but want to encourage our students and parents to keep trying. I hope that you come away from this post with a renewed energy and commitment to try to make practicing a priority and part of the daily routine. Even if it is only ten minutes, and mostly review, that’s great! It adds up.

How Pro Suzuki Parents Get Their Kids to Practice: Part II

This post is the second in a series of posts where I share the results of my research into how some parents actually make practicing happen. Part I was all about making practicing with your Suzuki student a part of your daily routine, you can [check it out here](#). Thank you for sharing it! As I studied parents’ responses to these questions:

How did you find time to practice with your kids?

How did you motivate your kids to practice?

I was struck by how similar most of the answers were. The most common suggestion was to make it a part of the daily routine, and the next was this:

PRACTICE IN THE MORNING.

The number of parents who said that this was the key to their success was astonishing to me. Why is practicing in the morning so effective? Here it is, in the words of the experts:

Lindsay Kemeny, (a pro parent in my studio!) says,

“We have started practicing first thing in the morning, and its amazing how much better it works for us! We used to do it in the afternoons, after school. But there were always so many distractions...after school activities, homework, tired from a long day, my other kids needing things, etc. It was so hard to be consistent! But practicing in the morning eliminates all that. I love it!”

I don’t know about you, but I hit a wall about 3pm. After a long day at school, those little brains need a rest...and they still have homework! Practicing first thing in the morning catches your Suzuki student when they are fresh, and you don’t have to worry about conflicts with after-school activities or play-dates.

My own Mom always had us practice in the morning. She says,

“As a parent it was easier for me to practice early in the day when both my child and I were fresh. If we didn’t get practicing done early, it felt like it was ‘hanging over my head’ all day. When we were finished, we both felt great knowing we had accomplished something.”

Are you familiar with the book, *Eat that Frog* by [Brian Tracy](#)? The title is based on a quote by Mark Twain,

“If you eat a frog first thing in the morning that will probably be the worst thing you do all day.”

Not that practicing with your child is like eating a frog but...well, sometimes it is probably like eating a frog. If you get it done early, it's done, you can feel good about accomplishing something tough, and you can move on with your day!

Claire Allen, [a fellow teacher and blogger](#), shared this tip,

“A friend of mine does “Violin Breakfast” with her daughter – they do 20-30 minutes of scales, exercises, and etudes before breakfast!”

While I don't know if most kids (or myself) could handle practicing before breakfast, having some breakfast and then practicing while the rest of family eats might be just the way to start the day.

Holly Blackwelder Carpenter, a Suzuki teacher AND a Suzuki parent says this,

“It is hard to find time, especially when I've been teaching all day long. My goal is before school, but that is hard to do sometimes. I just make sure we do it and I have learned to know when I have to adapt the practice and choose 10 good minutes over 30 minutes of “junk” practice. Frankly, I don't worry about motivation, there is a requirement in our house that we practice, even when we don't want to, just like we always brush our teeth and everything else that has to be done in our home.”

Some days are crazy, and it doesn't get done. That's ok! As long as you are trying to be consistently consistent (which is totally different from perfectly perfect), your child is going to make progress. The more consistency you have, the less resistance you will have from your child.

While mornings seem to be the power hour for many Suzuki students and their parents, it's not one size fits all! If you really can't add practicing to your morning routine, don't despair. Find a time that works for your family. Every child is different, and you know yours!

Emily Harkey says,

“We have four Suzuki kids. Two violinists, a cellist and a pianist. My 12 year old practices before school, my eight year old practices after school and the other two ...well, we fit them in when possible...in between making dinner and homework in the evenings.”

Obviously, all four children can't practice before school, that would be crazy. But they've found a way to make it work and to be consistent. If they know that practice time is coming, if you don't just spring it on them, “We need to practice right...now!” You will probably have less of a fight.

Here's your challenge: Decide when you will practice with your child, pick a consistent time: Is it in the morning? Right after school? Right after baseball practice? Think about your child's temperament and pick a time that will work for him (or her.) Let us know what time you chose in the comments.

How Pro Suzuki Parents Get Their Kids to Practice Part III

The question of whether or not to “bribe” children to practice is a controversial one. Those against a “bribe,” or as I prefer, a reward system, argue that we should encourage intrinsic motivation, helping our children to be self-motivated. Inspired and moved to practice merely by the goal of playing the violin with ease, accuracy, and beauty.

Is it bad to say that this just makes me laugh? I don't want to be rude, but it is just *so far away* from my experience as a Suzuki student, teacher, and as a (not yet Suzuki) parent.

I don't know about the children of the intrinsic motivation camp, but my kid isn't motivated to do ANYTHING that doesn't have immediate and concrete positive results.

Activities that don't have immediate and concrete positive results according to my almost-three-year-old:

- Eating anything for dinner besides tortillas
- Brushing his teeth
- Cleaning up toys
- Putting on clothes or shoes

- Going to Bed
- Leaving toilet paper on the roll
- Not hitting his brother
- Not standing on the couch
- Listening to almost anything I say

You get the idea, he is basically not self-motivated to do anything that he doesn't want to do at any given moment. I don't think he's all that different from most other children. The activities change as they grow older, but even children who love the violin and love to perform are not going to be motivated to practice on their own steam every single day. (Some days, maybe.)

(I don't want to throw my kid under the bus here, he really is a wonderful kid...for a two-year-old.)

Adults aren't always intrinsically motivated either, their brains are more developed so they can see the extrinsic rewards coming in the future. I doubt most adults go to work merely because of the satisfaction of a job well done, I think we go because we want a paycheck and want to be able to pay our bills, etc.

The expert Suzuki parents had these things to say about motivating children to practice by using rewards:

First, you need to adapt your methods to suit your child. One method may work wonderfully for one and not at all for another. A rewards system may work beautifully for a while, but then get stale after a while and need to be changed.

Norene Smith says,

*“As my children started [violin], they were very excited and loved to practice their little assignments from the teacher. After a few months and as the assignments became more difficult, they decided it wasn't all fun and games. **At that point rewards became helpful to get us through the resistance phase of practicing.** One daughter started hiding when I announced it was practice time. We sat down together and made a list of things she would like to do, outings with a parent usually, and she earned a sticker for each time she came to practice quickly and happily. After earning a predetermined number of stickers she received her reward outing. **Parents can cater these rewards for individual children as they know what their child enjoys.**”*

Alan Duncan, of The Suzuki Experience, says this,

*“**The other bit about motivation is keying into the unique personality of your children—being what they need you to be to make practice work.** In our case, my daughter is a list-maker. She likes things written out, checklisted and systematized. I'm sure some would balk at that. **And every kid enjoys games.** We make up so many games. Some of them make no sense with really bendable rules, but we have fun. We have a 12 sided die. For shifting exercises, we divide the result by 4 to decide what string to do the exercise on, etc. etc. We've used puppets and stuffed animals. She invites her dolls or the dog to listen in.”*

(I'm the same way, I love checklists and crossing things off.)

Julia Margaret Nichols says,

*“For my oldest at that time (age 6-7), we had to switch to my husband doing practices with him so that they would run more smoothly. For my middle one, I remember there being a few months where we had a reward for each song he played (1 m'n'm per song) which got him over that hump, and he also did some practicing with my husband. For my youngest, she refuses to play with her father, so we have gone through a variety of things to keep her going. Most recently, we had her do a 100 day challenge (for which she will get a medal at the next recital). **We still had some bad days with all of them, but once we got over that first big hump around age 7 (they started at age 5), things went a lot more smoothly with more self-motivation.**”*

Kadre Sneddon, parent of five violinists, says,

*“They always get a treat for practicing (a cookie or something they pick.) It's a bribe, but it keeps the peace. I do lots of stickers or games with little ones, and they eventually outgrow it. My oldest (11) is practicing on his own (his teacher's choice) and it's going very well this year. I spent the last couple of years really teaching him how to practice, and he asks for help if he needs it. I'm starting to work on teaching independent practice skills to my next kid (9) because, of necessity, she will need to spend some of her time alone as the time increases over the next year. **I try to follow the same routine for each practice—first favorite song, scales, studies, new stuff, review, fiddle, and last favorite song for each practice.**”*

I love this idea of beginning and ending the practice session with one of the child's favorite pieces. It is so important to end the violin lesson on a positive note, like a game, I imagine it is even more crucial in practice at home.

Many parents suggest keeping the instruments accessible (safely, of course!) Jenny Johnson says, ***“Their violins are out all the time and they can play them when they wish! When people come round they like to do a little show. They really like getting stickers. When they get 10 stickers they can go to the sweetie shop and choose a 15p sweetie necklace.”***

Emily Harkey, mom of four Suzuki kids, keeps instruments handy and uses a few different reward systems.

“I think the biggest help is that our living room looks like a music room. The instruments are always easily available and out. Some of my kids have named their instruments. Kinda like family I guess. Listening I just have it on all the time. For actual practices and repetitions: beans, m&m’s, checklists, etc. each of our Suzuki teachers are so different, but I like that as we pull from all over their expertise to pour into our home. I have liked one teacher’s practice challenge: for forty or so days of school they have to practice everyday and that doesn’t include lessons or group.”

Phankao Wan uses a sticker reward system with her seven-year-old, she also uses stickers to encourage focused practicing and discourage tantrums.

“He breaks up his practices into 3 sessions. he gets stickers for his practice sessions as well as some others—eg. homework or revision done. Actually—we have less problem getting to practice (practicing is like part of life for him)... What is more of a concern is the QUALITY of practices. So if it was a careful practice, I’d give him an extra bonus sticker. If he throws tantrums during practices or while doing schoolwork, I “deduct” (penalty!). He can use these stickers to redeem for certain activities like TV Time, Video Time, etc. There are activities like free play, book readings that I don’t require him to have “stickers” bc I’d be happy to have him playing or reading! So far, this method has been working well in teaching him responsibility and planning his time so that he can have lots of playtime!”

Dividing up the practice time into separate sessions over the day can be very helpful. It’s hard for little brains to focus for very long, so more frequent but shorter practice sessions is a great way to deal with shorter attention spans.

Lindsay Kemeny, a parent in my studio, says that changing things up and practicing in different places helps her practice with her son. ***“Something that can be motivating for practice is changing it up a bit. Having him stand on the coffee table to perform a review piece is always fun and results in some giggling. In the summer we practiced outside a few times..just changing rooms is nice too. We have used a sticker chart to help with motivation too...and when he gets so many stickers for practicing, then he gets a prize.”***

Kayleen Hall, another parent in my studio, uses the marble jar idea shared in McKenzie’s pdf for Suzuki Parents, [“5 Easy and Fun Practice Games.”](#) Here’s how she does it,

“We have a quart jar and she earns marbles. For example, bows games – one marble, review song 3 Times- one marble, new song drill spots- one marble, etc. Because I am trying to encourage morning practicing she earns double marbles when she practices in the morning. She also earns a marble for happy, focused practicing. She earns a reward when the jar is full. I also approach practicing with positive comments. Not, we have to practice but, I’m so excited I get to hear your violin songs and I have so much fun practicing with you.”

[Thinking about practicing in the morning? [Check out Part II of this series here.](#)]

I think that changing up the language you use about practicing can be powerful. Positive comments about practicing (on the parents’ side), or even replacing words like “practice” with “play” can make a huge difference.

“We have to practice now.”

vs.

“We get to play violin together now.”

Even if it only helps our attitude about practicing with our children, that’s still huge!

Most parents say that eventually their children no longer require the reward systems.

Norene Smith says,

“We found that after a while, our children didn’t need the external motivators as much. We tried to show how much we admired their efforts and accomplishments. We tried to provide opportunities for reinforcement by having the children play for grandparents, extended family, and friends. Our children enjoyed the positive attention from everyone. Over time, they felt satisfaction in their accomplishment and that became the motivation.”

After a time, many children will come to understand the correlation between effective practicing and successful performance. While we want to rescue our children from potentially embarrassing or difficult experiences, sometimes natural consequences (like a poor performance) are the only way to make that connection in a young brain.

I loved this story that Suzuki parent and teacher, Holly Blackwelder Carpenter, shared,

“My children are 4 and 5, and about 4 months ago, I was cooking and they came into the kitchen, clearly with an agenda. The oldest was the spokeswoman:

‘Mommy, you know we really don’t LIKE to practice,’ she said.

I replied, “No, I don’t suppose you do, not many people do.”

She was surprised I agreed with her!

I asked her “do you like to perform? “

“YES!” she said.

“Then we’d better practice, hadn’t we?”

They agreed. So I guess I don’t really motivate, I expect, and I remind them that practice=mastery of the piece and the opportunity to share it with others.”

You don’t need to try all of these ideas. Just pick one, and make it your own. I think Julia Margaret Nichols said it best,

“I think the important thing for Suzuki parents to remember is that there is no right way to go about this – you have to be patient and try to make it fun, it helps a lot if you are not pressed for time. Also, every child is different, so what works for one child may not work at all for yours – you know your child best, and you can come up with a solution that will get you through each phase with them!”

To sum up, here are the bare bones of these parents’ suggestions:

- Consider the temperament and preferences of your child
- Try rewards like stickers, treats, or outings
- Change things up by switching practice locations or practice partners
- Play favorite pieces every day
- Adjust your language so it is more positive (and be complimentary and positive during the practice session, in a genuine, honest way.)
- Practice multiple times a day, but in shorter durations.
- Keep instruments handy so they can be played if the child suddenly is in the mood
- Frequent performances for friends and family