

# THE POWER OF PRACTICE

## 7 PRACTICE HATS FOR PARENTS



## The Author

Sally is a musician who just happens to be fascinated by the piano and all things to do with piano teaching. She runs a teaching studio and teaching the piano is still her greatest joy.

In 2015 she formed a partnership with Sharon Mark-Teggart and founded The Curious Piano Teachers. This is an online resource that provides an innovative and inspiring space for piano teachers across the world to meet, share, reflect and grow.

Since its formation, The Curious Piano Teachers has attracted a world-wide reputation for innovation and collaboration.

In 2013 she was awarded a Ph.D from the Institute of Education, UCL. Her topic was the first comprehensive study of UK piano teachers, exploring common practices, expertise, values, attitudes and motivation to teaching.



**SALLY CATHCART, PHD**

“Sally, it's 6 o'clock - time to do your piano practice! Mum, do I have to? I don't feel like doing it tonight. Now, Sally, remember what we both agreed - if want to get better at playing the piano, you need to practise it everyday.”

That was me in the early years of my piano journey, a somewhat reluctant pianist at times but lucky enough to have a Mum who realised how important it was for her to act as my time keeper.

As piano teachers\* we recognise how hard it is for parents (or anyone with parental responsibility) to know just how best to support their child in their instrumental practice.

This post is written specially for you as you play a vital role in the learning process. Acquiring and maintaining the habit of regular practice seems to depend on a high level of support and encouragement from parents and teachers, particularly in the early years of learning'. [1]

\* do trust your teacher who is the professional. To find a teacher with qualifications and experience they should be a member of one of the professional organisations:

**EPTA (UK) ISM MU**



# The Problem

Practice can be a problem can't it?

As your child begins to realise the challenge ahead maybe enthusiasm for learning the piano quickly dwindles. Practice can easily become more of a chore than a joy and sometimes can feel like a real battleground! As less and less practice happens you become more and more frustrated and very aware of the money that is being spent (wasted?).

Parents don't mean to but threats can soon start to emerge: 'if you don't start to practise lessons are going to stop'. Or as teachers we are often asked to enter pupils for a graded exam in the hope that it will provide: 'something to work towards'.

What follows is an attempt to help parents understand the vital role they play in avoiding any of these scenarios.

## Research

There are 10,080 minutes in a week and on average your child will spend 30 minutes of these with his/her piano teacher. The rest of the time the pupil has to be his/her own teacher but of course many of children have no understanding of what practice involves.

[Click here to read more](#)

This is why YOUR role as a parent is so important. It's no wonder that research by Dr Andrea Creech at UCL suggests that when there is a 'harmonious trio' relationship between pupil, teacher and parent, pupils thrive and flourish. In this relationship parents 'engaged in higher levels of personal support' (2). It was characterised by:

- Parents taking an interest and talking to child about his/her views and goals
- Parents using praise to reward
- Parents who were aware of the relationship between pupil and teacher.

Additionally Dr Creech points out that 'Effective and supportive parental involvement in instrumental learning requires parents to be versatile' (3).

What does it mean to be versatile though? To help parents negotiate their way through this minefield here are 7 Practice Hats for you to try on.



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### ACTION:

Sit down for a few minutes with your child and look at their schedule for the week ahead, discussing what he/she wants to achieve and how long it might take to achieve it.

Add the practice sessions into the schedule.

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### ACTION:

Take a photo of your child at the piano and discuss with your teacher at the next lesson making any adjustments necessary.

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### ACTION:

Make contact with the teacher and ask him/her to pinpoint a couple of things you could listen out for.

## #1 THE PERSONAL ORGANISER

When lessons begin it is up to you to be your child's time manager, just like my mum in the opening paragraph. Research tells us that for progress to be made practice has to be under taken regularly - [click here](#) to see a previous blog post about this - a little and often.

Five to six times a week for 10 minutes has a far more long lasting effect than 60 minutes the day before the lesson.

Children have little sense of time so it is up to you to be in charge of when practice takes place.

## #2 THE SERVICES PROVIDED

Make sure your child has everything s/he needs for practice. The piano ideally should be somewhere central, warm and well lit. No child enjoys being sent off to a remote corner of the house to do solitary practice. If the piano is close to the rest of the family activities you will be better placed for the next hat.

Additionally check the seating is at the correct height (children tend to grow!) and keep the piano well tuned.

## #3 THE NO.1 FAN

Your positive opinions and thoughts matter deeply to your child. They should know that you will always give them your unconditional support and love even when things don't quite go right! You don't need to be a musician - just listen out for small improvements and maybe once a week sit down and become the 'audience'.

Be as specific as you can about what you enjoyed.



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#### ACTION:

If your child is a beginner and you haven't yet sat in on a lesson drop an email to the teacher asking if this is possible so that you can give help at home.

### #4 A FLEXIBLE FRIEND

Your role will change as your child gets older and more accomplished.

Beginners need a lot of help and ideally you should sit in on early lessons so that you can see and hear what the teacher does.

Back at home lots of guidance from you will be needed, reading through the notes from the teacher together and giving guidance, but, whenever possible, get your child to explain what has to be done.

As expertise grows so should independence and the type of support required. Maybe you could ask your teenage child to teach you something they are learning?

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#### ACTION:

Spend a few minutes considering how you and the teacher are currently communicating and whether this could be improved by an email requesting a quick catch up phone call.

### #5 THE COMMUNICATOR

For the harmonious trio to be most effective you need to be at the centre of a three-way conversation. If practice has been problematic because of illness or family reasons let the teacher know in advance.

If you don't understand something in the practice notes contact the teacher as soon as possible to get clarification - don't let another 10,050 minutes go wasted!

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#### ACTION:

Giving children a choice is a really powerful strategy in times of conflict.

Think about two choices you could present next time practice becomes a struggle.

### #6 THE DIPLOMAT

Meaningful practice is both engaging and hard work!

There will be times when practice is not an attractive proposition. This could be for a number of reasons; for example maybe there is a particularly challenging and new aspect to a practice task or maybe friends are playing outside. Negotiating with your child about how challenges can be broken down into a series of tiny challenges really helps.

Arguments at the piano should be avoided at all costs. The instrument should not become a battleground and the piano stool should remain a positive place to sit.

Even just moving away from the piano to another part of the room to negotiate can make a difference. The use of rewards in the shape of stickers or chocolate are best avoided as they promote external motivation rather than the internal feeling of 'I play the piano because I want to!'

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#### ACTION:

If practice currently seems to consist of playing through from the start (see previous blog) work out with your child and your teacher how it can be more targeted.

### #7 THE PATIENT PARENT

Practice is frankly a messy business!

It should be full of small fragments of the pieces, with lots of repetition. Frankly, it really shouldn't sound particularly pleasing and really requires you to be very patient and tolerant.

Playing through a whole piece from beginning to end should be an occasional treat rather than the norm!

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Learning an instrument means learning lots of life skills - children ‘enjoy’ playing when they feel they are great at it. Being great at it takes time, focus, persistence and resilience. Support them unconditionally when the going gets tough and celebrate when they achieve the weekly targets!”

A MEMBER OF THE CURIOUS PIANO TEACHERS COMMUNITY]



## The Results

We know that with the type of support outlined above pupils are far more likely to be successful in their efforts to play the piano. With your support practice time will increase, pupils will become more engaged with what they are doing, which in turn will lead to them having a clearer understanding of everything. Inevitably, motivation and progress will grow.

Here, at The Curious Piano Teachers, we would love parents to try the 7 Practice Hats. After all, the alternative is to continue as before, which for many young students leads inevitably to minimal process and eventually giving up.

If you are a piano teacher please do share this with any of your Piano Parents. If you are a parent please feel free to share this with others.

[1] The role of practice in the development of performing musicians. 1996. John A. Sloboda, Jane W. Davidson, Michael J.A. Howe and Derek G. Moore. The British Journal of Psychology. Vol. 87, issue 2, pages 287-309.

[2] Learning a musical instrument: the case for Parental Support. 2010 Andrea Creech Music Education Research. 12, 1, 13-32. p 25.

[3] ibid. p. 21.

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