

Special Report

10 WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF MUSIC LESSONS

The following report is a music instruction industry standard. Here you will find practical advice used by music studios nationally. We've added additional information to further assist you in your quest for the best music education environment in your area. You may also want to refer to our FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page for Music Reach specific questions and answers. Check back often for more free reports; both industry standard practical knowledge and reports created exclusively by the Music Reach team.

1. How young is too young? Starting at the right age

Adults can start learning any instrument at any time. Their success will be based on their willingness to commit to regular practice.

For children, starting at the right age is key to the success of music lessons. Some people will tell you “the sooner, the better,” but this attitude can actually backfire and become a negative. If a child is put into lessons too early, they may feel overwhelmed and frustrated. In this case, their lessons will become an unpleasant experience, and they will want to stop. The last thing you want to do is turn a child off to music because of a bad experience. Children who are at least the suggested earliest starting age usually do very well. The following are guidelines in determining the most effective ages at which children can start taking music lessons:

Preschool Learners (3-4 Years)

If a preschooler has a keen desire and wants to get involved with music, a group preschool music class will give them a good foundation in the basics, which will be helpful in later private lessons. At this age, private lessons are less than ideal because children have not yet experienced the formal learning environment of kindergarten or school. Their attention spans are still short and they learn more effectively through the game-oriented, preschool group environment.

A great program available for preschool learners is “MUSICWORKS 4 kids,” located in Doylestown. While Music Reach is not affiliated with “MUSICWORKS 4 kids,” we feel it is an exceptional program and highly recommend it for children under seven years of age. You can reach them at: 215-712-0388.

Kindergarten-Elementary Learners

Piano/Keyboard

The youngest age recommended for getting your child started with private piano lessons is 5 years. At this age, children have begun to develop longer attention spans and can retain material with ease.

Guitar - Acoustic, Electric and Bass

8 years of age is the earliest recommended age for private guitar lessons. Guitar playing requires a fair amount of pressure on the fingertips to hold down the strings to form notes and chords. Children under 8 generally have small hands too small to accommodate the needed reach, and may find playing uncomfortable.

Voice Lessons

10 years is recommended as the youngest age for private vocal lessons. Though there are definite exceptions, the sophistication in the theory and principle of classical voice lessons sometimes eludes younger minds. Also, developing vocal cords are generally not yet ready for the rigors of vocal technique until this age. However, it is never too early to see how well your child can sing in tune. Regardless of ability at this point, you may encourage your children to express themselves in song, as it is a joyous activity at any age.

Drums

The average age for beginning private drum lessons is 8. This varies greatly, depending on the size of the child and whether or not they want to play a full set or a single drum. If they aspire to play a full kit, they must be able to reach both the pedals and the cymbals.

Wind instruments

Due to developing lung capacity and the need for fingers to be able to span sometimes widely spaced keys (and, in the case of the saxophone, the size of the instrument itself), the recommended age for woodwind beginners is 9 years old.

Violin

For violin, some teachers will start children as young as 2 ½, but the most productive learning occurs when the beginner is 5 or older.

Cello

Students age 5 and over may begin cello lessons. It's important to note that both cellos and violins are available in different sizes to accommodate a wide range of student sizes. Because of this, parents need not envision their child hidden behind a giant, full-sized cello, or struggling to play a violin they can't even hold. It is also important to note that both instruments are extremely delicate, so parents may need to assist younger children in developing sensitivity to safe handling throughout their practice routines.

2. Insist on private lessons when learning a specific instrument.

Group classes work well for preschool music programs, and for music theory lessons. However, when actually learning how to play an instrument, private lessons are far superior. In private lessons, it's unlikely that the instructor will miss anything, and each student can learn at his or her own pace. This means the teacher does not have to teach a class at a "middle-of-the-road" level, risking losing the interest of more advanced students and frustrating those less advanced.

Private instructors have the time and focus to work on each individual student's strengths and weaknesses, making the student the primary focus of the teacher during each lesson period. Teachers also enjoy not having to divide their attention between five to ten students at a time, because it allows them to help each student develop to her or his full potential.

3. Choose the best practice environment.

Music Reach lessons are conducted in your home - on your own instrument. We also offer lessons at our studio under special circumstances. However, we feel strongly that the best place to learn about music is privately, at your home, for several reasons:

Students are more comfortable in an environment they're familiar with. Also, without the distraction of other instruments present in a music school environment, students tend to be satisfied with becoming thoroughly familiar with their own instrument, rather than skipping from one to another.

In addition, parents get to know the music instructor on a more personal level. And with a family oriented in-home approach, curious siblings can listen in and get inspired as well. Another great advantage to in-home lessons is that teachers can help students get the most out of their home practice

environment. By determining what distractions students may be faced with, your instructor can then recommend several options to minimize these distractions. With a few tips and tricks, students learn to overcome any uncontrollable distractions (barking dogs, ringing telephones, etc.) as they develop their practice routines. It's important to establish an inspiring practice environment at the student's home, as well as helping them to make sure their instrument is correctly tuned and in proper condition. In-home lessons also offer a hassle free approach for parents, as they need not shuttle their kids back and forth to their music lessons.

4. Commit to regular, sustained practice.

One of the biggest challenges for any musicians is getting into a sound practice routine. The first step is to choose the best time to practice. Parents can help by working with their child to make this decision, based on the realities of other individual and family time commitments. It always works best to involve the child in establishing this practice time, rather than imposing it, so the student feels part of the process. An added benefit is that such a decision-making process will give your child experience in owning responsibility for desired outcomes.

Once the best practice time has been established, commit to setting aside the same time every day, so it becomes part of a routine or habit. This works particularly well for children. Generally, the earlier in the day the practicing can occur, the more likely it is that practicing will actually take place. Start too late in the day, and energy flags, making it difficult to sustain the concentration needed. Again, this is particularly true with children, whose parents find the need less reminding to practice if the session is set for earlier in the day.

Music Reach teachers will work with each student to customize a goal-oriented practice routine. This helps students think about practice in terms of moving toward a goal of personal accomplishment, rather than as a time period to be endured.

5. Schedule practice in terms of repetition instead of time.

This strategy works quite well for beginners at an early age. Use this method quite often when setting practice schedules for beginners ages 7 and younger. For some children, the thought of practicing 20 or 30 minutes may seem like an eternity—unachievable—defeating them before they even start. So, instead of setting a time frame, use repetition. For example, “Practice this piece all the way through, four times each day, and this scale five times a day.” Younger children, who haven't yet learned to tell time, will not pay attention to the amount of time they are practicing, because there is no point of reference for them. However, with the ability to count, they know if they are on repetition number three, they are almost finished. This allows them a sense of accomplishment, a strong

motivator to continue practicing.

6. Use recognized teaching materials.

There are some excellent materials developed by professional music educators, and we strongly recommend that you carefully consider the learning resources you provide for your music student. Here are some important considerations:

- Is the lesson book you're considering part of a series created for students in a variety of situations? For example: For piano, there are lesson books for very young beginners, and books for adult students that have never played before. There are books that can start you at a comfortable level, then graduate you to higher skill levels. Make sure you choose resources that allow you to grow without a jarring change from one style to another, which you'll encounter if you have to shift, mid-stream, to another book.
- Have these materials been well researched, and are they continually upgraded and improved? These are characteristics you want to look for in learning materials, to ensure that no important part of learning the instrument can inadvertently be left out. Continual updates make sure advances in teaching methods, practice techniques, and music technology are incorporated to make learning your instrument easier and more effective.
- Are your learning materials created by a recognized expert in teaching your instrument? It's important not just to assure the quality of your resources, but also to ensure that if you ever have to move to a different part of the country, qualified teachers and institutions will recognize the materials and be able to smoothly transition with you from where your previous teacher left off, and continue without having to go over material you've already mastered.

As students progress through their music education, Music Reach teachers will integrate personalized exercises and activities into their lessons. However, these activities are based around recognized teaching materials and serve as complement to the industry standard curriculum.

7. Work with teachers you can trust, and who love to teach.

The key to education begins with having the right teacher and this applies to any subject, including music education. Higher levels of education are admirable in any professional, but university training does not guarantee a good teacher. Good interpersonal relationship skills are at least as important. Before you commit to working with any instructor, get to know your potential teacher. Have a few conversations, and ask yourself:

- Can I relate to this person?
- Do I feel comfortable around him or her?
- Is this person an inspiring individual?
- Does this person seem like he or she would take pride in my success?
- Does this person show enthusiasm and passion that makes it obvious s/he loves to teach?
- Is this someone I would feel comfortable leaving my child alone with?

Music Reach teachers go through a careful screening process to ensure our students' safety. In addition, we only hire music professionals with strong moral and ethical values. And because most lessons are conducted in your home, parents and family members get to know their teachers on a more personal level. Many of our teachers develop friendships with students and family members outside of the music lessons.

8. Make lessons rewarding.

This tactic works very well for both children and adult students. Music Reach integrates creative activities into our music lessons, which function as rewards and motivators to practice. These activities are educational, fun, and keep the lessons fresh and exciting. For younger students, no reward is too small. Music teachers reward young children for a successful week of practicing with stars and stickers on their work. Praise tends to be the most coveted award: There's just no substitute for a pat on the back or a "job well done."

9. Provide ongoing encouragement.

As with all things worthwhile, learning to play a musical instrument can be difficult at times, and everyone needs a little nod of encouragement from time to time, especially children. Let the student know that even during times of discouragement, the cumulative effect of their efforts will pay off. Students can achieve anything they set their minds to, but only when they are motivated to do so. Never underestimate the power of positive reinforcement.

10. Set realistic goals.

Music should be something that you enjoy for a lifetime. That's a long return on investment, so take the long view and try not to put unrealistic expectations on yourself or your children to learn too quickly. Everyone learns at a different pace and the key is to encourage students to have fun while they're learning.

Also, take into consideration that it's a natural learning progression to occasionally reach

plateaus. Sometimes a student can reach a point where he or she feels as though they are not progressing. This can be a time of great frustration.

Music Reach lessons have been designed to keep these frustrations to a minimum. By infusing creative activities into the lessons, we facilitate opportunities for our students to constantly discover new avenues to express their creativity. Students learn to set their own goals, develop their own style, and stay motivated throughout the learning process. Remember, it's the journey, not the destination that truly matters!