

Notes from a presentation by Dr. Christopher Fisher to the New England Piano Teachers Association  
February 24, 2020 First Parish Church, Watertown, MA

### The Secret Ingredient for Piano Teaching Success: The Powerful Role of Parents

Dr. Fisher began with the “Triangle of Educational Success,” which has the student at the top, with the base on the left as the teacher, and the base on the right the parents, who act as home teachers and coaches. Without parental support, the educational experience suffers. Students are more likely to quit, think they are not talented, and fail to make progress because they need guidance for effective practicing. Progress generates enthusiasm.

Teachpianotoday.com contains resources for parents and teachers, such as handouts and pod casts. Some of these handouts were used in the presentation.

A picture was shown of a student flying on a bird, with one wing representing parents and the other wing the teacher.

Parents need to be Inspired, Invested and Involved.

Recipe for Piano Teaching Success:

Involved Parents = Successful Practice

Successful Practice = Progress

Progress = Happy Students

Progress + Happy Students = Happy Parents and Teachers

Happy Students, Parents and Teachers = Successful Studio

Parental role:

- Quiet attendance

- Takes notes at lesson

- Assumes role of home practice guide

- Schedules and insures that practice happens

- Supports, supervises and assists

- Instills discipline and focus in practice

- Encourages child through periods of frustration

- Gives child full and undivided attention

As a student develops self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, the parent can do less.

The Three E's (of teacher to parent relationship):

1. Engage - teacher engages with, communicates with parents

2. Educate - teacher provides resources to educate parents on their role and how they can help

3. Encourage - teacher gives assurances and emotional support to parents

The objective of piano lessons is to create people knowledgeable and enthusiastic about music, rather than creating concert pianists.

### Piano Parent Retreats

These can be an opportunity for parents to “communicate and commiserate” with one another. These should take place at least once a year; if once a year, at the beginning of the school year. Veteran parents can lead workshops. One teacher has veteran parents write their top ten piano parenting tips, and then collects and organizes these in a sheet for new piano parents.

### Piano Parent Workshop Discussion Topics

- Jack of all trades, master of none. Kids are overdosing on too many extracurricular activities. Parents can help by limiting their number.

- Scheduling practice. Elissa Milne, Australian piano educator, says that just as parents don't give their children the option of skipping bathing, tooth brushing, etc., parents should not make practicing an option.

- Dealing with frustration, as practice is not always fun. Parents need to set aside their own frustrations to be present with the child.

- Long-term commitment. Children need at least two years to truly try something out.

A study showed that children who stay with an activity for more than two years are more likely to graduate from college, hold jobs, and engage in volunteer activities.

- Goal setting: must be achievable and compelling.

- Praise should be focused on effort, not talent.

- Wise parenting. A chart with four squares from Angela Duckworth's Grit describes four parenting styles: Permissive, Neglectful, Authoritarian and Wise. Parents can be Supportive (loving and caring) or Unsupportive, Demanding or Undemanding. Wise parents are Demanding but also Supportive. Permissive parents are undemanding but supportive; Neglectful parents are unsupportive and undemanding; Authoritarian parents are demanding but unsupportive. Supportive and demanding parents (Wise parents) are tough and loving, teaching their children to finish what they begin.

-Deliberate practice:

- A clearly defined stretch goal - not too difficult, not too easy

- Full concentration and effort - "Flow"

- Immediate and informative feedback

- Repetition with reflection and refinement (no mindless repetition)

- Parent Book Club - parents read and discuss books relevant to education, music study, etc.

- Parents should be truly present, "bonding on the bench" during practice.

- Genuine interest and enthusiasm are contagious. Praise effort on hard things.

- Express love apart from achievement.

- "Guardrails vs. Handcuffs" - setting boundaries while being flexible. Children feel safe with healthy limits. Be careful not to give too much decision power. The book Helping Parents Practice: Ideas for Making it Easier, by Edmund Sprunger, helps support and inform parents who want to maximize their usefulness and minimize their interference.

- Yellow Light moments: watch for when to help make adjustments; be flexible and adaptable.

- Scaffolded assistance

- Avoid micromanaging. Learning is messy like a do-it-yourself home project. Like riding a bike with training wheels - leave room for mistakes within reason.

- Keep your eyes (and ears) on the prize - listen to quality classical music with children.

- Be gentle and specific when communicating with children.

- Monitor and respond to motivation and focus. Acting up may indicate too much too soon.

- Variety. Have a toolbox of strategies, activities.

- Repetition should be mindful.

- Rewards should be used rarely, carefully and well thought out.

Purpose Driven Practice:

-Students can do a "Practice-a-thon" for a charity of their choice

- Sharing music at nursing homes, retirement centers, community centers, church schools, etc.

- Skype/Facetime concerts for friends and family

- Upload videos to a YouTube channel.

Ways parents can "Fill the Piano Practice Tank" from teachpianotoday.com:

- Host a Piano Picnic

- "Check in" - call the child and ask to hear them play some music

- "Post Office" - mail the child a note of encouragement.

Practice Packs

Practice bracelets, found at musicinmotion.com, can be moved from one wrist to the other with each correct repetition of music. This can also help young students practice finding their position on the keyboard, since they have to take their hands off the keyboard to move the bracelets.

Piano Safari makes "practice strategy" cards to use.

Repertoire cards with names of pieces student knows well, drawn at random for them to play.

Triple A pieces: ready Anytime, Anywhere for Anyone.

Use checklists rather than timers, as in marking off each time a piece is practiced.

Legos - add Legos to pile for each repetition.

Fuzzy dice - roll them to see how many repetitions to do or which piece to play.

An app, “Decide Now,” can be used to make spinners for random selections. Leila Viss has written an article, “50 Ways to Use Decide Now,” that can be found on her website: leilaviss.com.

Music educator Mary Craig Powell used “focus cards” - students focus on just one aspect of the music at a time, such as articulation, dynamics, correct notes, etc.

Students can learn by teaching their parents.

Parents can give “Get Out of Chores Free” cards, which children can use to choose practice instead of a chore.

#### Technology and Practice

Parents can make a video of child’s practice midweek to send to teacher

Practice apps such as Collabra or Tonara are available.

### Motivation, Mindset and Grit: Fostering a Culture of Excellence

Dr. Fisher began by asking, “Why do we teachers do what we do?” Some answers included: the fascination in watching students learn and develop; seeing students react to old teaching material with new eyes; teaching the skills of learning; connecting mind and body, and connecting with others; arts feed the spirit; and learning from students.

Our mission as teachers is to help students grow as musicians and as people; to become life-long learners.

Robert Frost said, “I am not a teacher, but an awakener.”

What is motivation? Curiosity, enthusiasm, drive. The fuel of human behavior. The desire to persist in the face of obstacles. A catalyst for change.

The urge to master the new is the best predictor of productivity.

How to motivate: Observe, Listen, Learn and Lead. Teachers observe students to learn what “makes them tick,” what motivates them.

#### Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation:

Intrinsic motivation is from enjoyment in the task itself. Extrinsic motivation is outside the task, contingent, a reward unrelated to the activity. Alfie Kohn, in Punished by Rewards, says that extrinsic rewards kill creativity and harm relationships. They lose power over time and only provide a short term boost. Commissioned works of art are often evaluated as less creative than works done for their own sake.

Rewards and incentives should be used Judiciously, Randomly (unexpected), and only occasionally. It helps if rewards in piano lessons are somehow related to music study, as in new sheet music or CD’s.

Daniel Pink, in his book Drive, gives “Carrots and Sticks: The Seven Deadly Flaws:”

- Extinguish intrinsic motivation
- Diminish performance
- Crush creativity and natural curiosity
- Crowd out good behavior
- Encourage cheating, shortcuts, unethical behavior
- Encourages short term thinking

Making progress is essential to motivation.

Implicit Theory of Intelligence - Carol Dweck, Mindsets.

Fixed mindset vs. Growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe intelligence and talent are fixed traits and can’t be changed. Those with a growth mindset believe intelligence and talent can be developed and improved.

Fixed mindset - focus is on image of self presented to others.

Growth mindset - focus is on learning new things; challenges and mistakes are chance to learn.

Fixed mindset - challenges and mistakes are a threat to the ego. Perfectionism is a fixed mindset trait.

### Strategies for Encouraging a Growth Mindset

- Model a growth mindset
- Affirm that everyone has potential to learn and grow
- Discuss the connection between effort, patience, persistence and thoughtful practice with achievement of goals.
- Say that persistence and hard work equals success
- The goal should be hard work, working smart
- Grit is passion and perseverance in long-term goals.
- Mozart had strong parental support and superior training; it was not just “talent.”
- “From the Top” broadcasts can show students how normal kids succeed through hard work.
- Say that mistakes are opportunities to learn.
- Take risks, unravel the fear of failure.
- Mistakes are proof that you are trying; no mistakes means you are not trying.
- If it doesn’t challenge you, it doesn’t change you.
- Share with the student stories of your own mistakes and imperfections.
- Learning requires bravery and courage.
- Courage helps us move through challenges.
- Learning is a marathon, not a sprint.
- Insatiable curiosity is the key to creativity and innovation.

### Power and Pitfalls of Praise

- Be specific, focused on effort, on strategy, process and progress.
- Be sincere
- Describe what is observed
- Frame praise as a question -- How did you do that? Good teaching is asking good questions.
- Be concise.

### Self Determination Theory - Edward Deci

Three components of motivation:

1. Autonomy - desire to be self directed. Giving choices helps.
  2. Competence - desire to get better at something, to master it.
  3. Relatedness - desire for meaningful human relationships in our work.
1. To encourage autonomy, teachers can give students pieces for them to learn on their own. They can also provide choices from a given menu, appropriate to a student’s current level of ability.
  2. Problem solving (for competence):
    - What did I hear/observe?
    - Why did it happen?
    - How can I fix it?
    - Did I fix it?

Setting goals: SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely.

Ask students to write down their top learning goals, and share with a practice partner, consult it regularly, create a self-report, and compare that to the teacher’s report at the end of the project.

Metacognition

- Self evaluation and reflection
  - Understanding what motivates and drives us
  - Ability to independently set goals, select practice strategies and exercise self-discipline
3. For relatedness:
    - Public performances
    - Collaborative music making
    - Group lessons
    - Practice partners
    - Student designed and directed projects

Handouts for the lectures are available at [www.chrisfisherpiano.com](http://www.chrisfisherpiano.com), on the Workshops and Lectures page. Both handouts include extensive lists of books and other resources.

Links for Handouts:

[The Secret Ingredient for Piano Teaching Success](#)

[Motivation, Mindset, and Grit](#)