

Practical Practicing

“How good would the band be if it were only as good as me?”

Every good musician knows that regular practice is a must, but careless practice can actually make you worse. Students are not born knowing how to practice, it must be taught. It is also important for parents to understand the process of practical practicing, in order to assist their children at home.

What is practice?

Practice does not make perfect, practice makes permanent! The word “practice” means “to perform or exercise repeatedly in order to acquire or perfect a skill,” according to Webster’s Dictionary. It is not, however, **mindless** repetition. There must be a goal to every practice session. The goal should be small enough to reach by the end of the session so that the student can judge whether or not the goal is met.

When, where and how long should someone practice?

Parents can best help their children by creating an encouraging environment at home. The sounds of a young person playing an instrument can often be loud and bothersome to frazzled, busy parents. Parents should work with their children to provide an appropriate time and place to practice. This has the added benefit of involving the student in taking ownership of the practice time. The practice place should be quiet, well lit and free from distractions. A straight-back chair for proper posture and a music stand complete the setting.

Practice sessions that follow a logical process produce better outcomes and set the motivational wheel spinning in the right direction: Better outcomes leads to faster progress; Faster progress results in greater motivation; Greater motivation results in increased practice sessions.

Many people underestimate the value of a **daily** commitment. Skipping a few days often results in a pledge to catch up with one or more really long sessions. Sadly, these catch-up sessions either do not happen or are counterproductive. Overly long practice can cause mental and physical fatigue. This leaves students frustrated and sets their motivational wheels spinning in the wrong direction. Too many of these long, make-up sessions provoke negative attitudes toward practicing and take the fun out of music. When pressed for time, it is much better to shorten the daily practice session than it is to skip several days and try to make them up all at once.

Remember, the **daily** aspect is more important than any specified amount of time. Slow and steady wins the race. Play the instrument **every day**, even if it is for just a few minutes.

The process for practice is more important than the amount of time spent practicing.

How should I organize my daily practicing?

1. Preparation

Empty your mind of any negative events or worries of the day. Relax. Practicing should not be stressful. Determine what you want to accomplish in the session rather than deciding on a specific number of minutes to practice. Set small tasks as stepping-stones to your goals. Emphasize mastery of the material. Do not just spend time aimlessly on the instrument.

Because effective practice requires a certain amount of repetition and routine, boredom becomes the biggest obstacle. Thoughts of a dozen other things you could be doing creep into your head. When this happens, create an event that will inspire you! Plan a performance and focus on the pieces that you intend to play. Even planning to play your pieces for a small, informal gathering of family or friends can be a wonderful source of motivation.

Do not think of what you are doing as "practice." Think of it as "playing." **Playing is fun!** A musician prepares to "play" with a sense of exploration and wonder. Change your way of thinking from "I have to go practice" to "I get to play my instrument today!" Remember, you are doing this for yourself, to make yourself better.

2. Warm-up

Everybody wants to skip the warm-up. This is true for beginners, young students, advanced students and adults. People complain that it keeps them from getting to the fun part. The truth is, warming up enables you to play better during the rest of your session. Athletes stretch before they play in order to warm up their muscles and help prevent injury. The same is true for musicians and the muscles we use. Here are some basic warm-up suggestions:

- **Long tones** - hold each note in a scale for at least 12 seconds. Keep the tone as steady as possible. Rest for at least 12 seconds between each note.
- **Play scales** to warm up your fingers. Play games with different patterns.
- **Lip slurs** for brass players.
- **Pop ups** for woodwind players.
- **Rudiments** for snare drum players.
- Rest for about 5 minutes before going to the "maintenance" step.

3. Maintenance

Briefly play through some things you've already mastered in order to maintain your skill. Do not spend a lot of time on this part. Parents, if your child plays the same music every day at home, and it sounds good, encourage him/her to move on to the next step. Rest for about 5 minutes before going to the "advancement" step.

4. Advancement

Now is the time to practice new material. Brain research shows that most people only remember about seven items of new information at a time. To efficiently learn larger pieces of music, it **must** be broken down into smaller sections. For most people, this means just four to eight notes!

Carefully examine the music that you want to play, then try to play it from the beginning to the end without stopping. Don't worry about playing it perfectly, your goal is to identify the sections that are most difficult. Put brackets around those sections. **Don't be afraid to write on your music!** Professionals do it all the time. After you decide which section to focus on, use the **five-step process**.

1. Clap and count the rhythm out loud. It is very important to do this out loud.
2. Using the first note of the section, play the section in a "single-note" version.
3. Finger the notes on your instrument while saying the letter names out loud. (Use your fingering chart to look up any notes that you find confusing.)
4. "Air play" the passage. Use **lots** of air.
5. Play the music on your instrument, try to hear the counting in your head.

Repeat all five-steps several times for that section. **Your goal is progress, not perfection.** If no progress is made after the first few tries, divide the section in half and make it a smaller section. Keep dividing until you make progress - even if it is just a measure or two. Understand that mistakes are a part of practicing. We all make LOTS of them. If we never made mistakes, there would be no need to practice! Once you make progress on a section, play it over and over again in a loop for a minute or two, then move to the next section. This makes your progress permanent.

When all the notes and rhythms come easily, start looking at the symbols **around** the notes. Tempo, dynamic markings, phrasing, breath marks and articulation help the music come alive.

When practicing small sections of new material, the light at the end of the tunnel may appear distant. Playing from the beginning to the end of a piece of music, regardless of wrong notes and rhythms, may sound like fun, but real enjoyment comes from learning a piece well and playing through it successfully.

5. Improvise!

Devote some practice time to making things up. Play any notes you want, any speed you want, any volume you want. Try to convey an emotion. Have fun!

6. Play something YOU pick out just for fun.

Buy some fun pieces that YOU really want to play. Several music stores have very large collections of music for every instrument. Movie themes, T.V. themes, famous classical melodies and pop music are very fun for younger students to try.

If executed properly by students and supported by parents, this practical practicing procedure will facilitate success. Moreover, the concepts of structure and process will help students succeed in every aspect of their lives.