Successful Teaching Tips for Young Piano Students

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Finding Passion & Falling in Love
- The first skill a child needs to acquire at the piano is a passion for the instrument.
- Our job is to teach the child to fall in love with making music, and teach them to love coming to lessons.
- Without that love, they will never survive and withstand the onslaught of repetitive tasks that come with learning piano.

Before the First Lesson
- Advise parent on studio & payment policies, and what to bring to first lesson. Avoid ‘business’ talk during the lesson. It’s boring....

First Lesson
- Introduce yourself. What do you want your student to call you?
- Speak eye-to-eye
- Be enthusiastic
- Have books and materials ready

First Lesson Activities
- Posture on bench
- Distance from keyboard
- Foot stool, cushions, adjustable bench
- Right vs. left hand
- Finger numbers
- Alphabet - name every key
- High vs. low
- Find groups of twos, threes
- Hand position
- Make sure the student PLAYS the piano at the first lesson!
- Arm weight (drop hands on lap, then piano)
- Can fingers make a sound on closed piano lid?

Don’t Ask Questions You Don’t Really Want Answers To...
- “Do you want to try it on your own now?”
- “Do you want to play this again?”

It’s Better to Make Statements...
• *Let’s play this again.*

• **Be specific:** *This time, let’s listen for a big difference between piano and forte. When you’re done playing, I’m going to ask you if you really heard the difference between your louds and softs.* Exercises like this teach the student to listen to their own playing.

• Another example: *When you’re done playing this time, I’m going to ask you if you remembered to make the last note of every phrase soft. Help me listen...*

**Give Students Time to Think**

- Wait for them to process and compose a response
- Sometimes we ask questions and then blow right on without waiting for an answer
- If you don’t really want to wait for an answer, don’t ask the question to begin with

**Give tasks they will succeed at**

- The most effective way to learn is to have a series of successive challenges, where each challenge is only slightly more challenging than the previous
- Huge challenges discourage students — especially when they’re young
- *Always* set the student up for success

**Give Concise Instructions**

- If you speak only a few choice words, the student will really listen when you speak
- Babbling can easily lose the child’s attention
- Think before you speak. Word choice is important

**Be a Motivator**

- The chief goal is not to get through X number of pieces or concepts, but to motivate students to want to learn about music
- If you’ve nurtured their excitement about making music, you’ve met your goal as a teacher that day.

**Share ‘True’ Statements, even if they aren’t!**

- *It was hard for me to keep my fingers curved when I started, too.*
- *I always thought I was making an obvious difference between forte and piano, but that must have been in my own head, because nobody else could tell!*  

**Model Curiosity**

- Phrase things as if we are experimenting: “*Let’s see what happens when we...*”
- Student are always excited to find out what amazing sounds they can make!

**Get Off the Bench If They Start to Wiggle...**

- Do they need to use the bathroom?
- Break up sitting activities with activities that allow them to move around a little
- Find or create your own interactive and movement activities that effectively teach the concepts you want them to learn

**Off-Bench Ideas**

- Alphabet cards on the floor
• Stand up and tap rhythm
• While I play their piece, student stands and hits a drum for every rest. Then we switch!
• “I Spy” with flashcards
• Ear training activities
  o Clap back the rhythm I play
  o Early interval identification (I start with 2nds & 3rds, or steps and skips)

Experience First, Label Later
• Experiencing a concept first, and then labeling it, is the most effective way to learn
• Have student repeat the new concept multiple times (dynamics, articulations, time signature, tempi, etc.)
• Go on a ‘discovery mission’ to find the new symbol in other pieces.

Reinforcement
• …the way young students begin to remember things
• Young children will often remember that they learned a concept, but might not remember what it’s called
• Present concepts in a variety of ways
• Become familiar with different learning styles - aural, tactile, visual

Young Students...
• Very inquisitive – stay focused!
• Short attention span
• Lessons need to be fun and engaging
• Progress can be slow
• Change strategy or activity if what you’re doing isn’t working.

Rhythm
• Ta & ti-ti are used in schools, so kids often already know this system
• Imitation clap back games
• Clap rhythms of new songs
• Name game

Lesson Length & Time
• Change activities often
• The lesson is over when it’s over
• Put parent on the bench
• Switch places – let the student be the teacher
• Move to the floor
• Is lesson at a good time for the child?

Talk About Home Practice with the Student & Parent
• Establish practice habits, a daily routine of going to the piano
• 5 minutes is fine
• 5 minutes several times a day is even better
• Remain positive and encouraging – think of Suzuki philosophy - "Every child can."

Teaching Mastery
• Repetition games
• Small steps
  1. 5 times perfectly, a ‘friend or toy’ gets put up on the piano for each perfect execution
  2. 5 times perfectly, a ‘friend’ goes on the piano for each perfect repetition, but a friend is taken away if a mistake is made. False starts count as mistakes
  3. 3 in a row perfectly
• When you demonstrate, exaggerate the concept you are teaching so it's obvious to the student what you're trying to communicate.
• Use ‘friends or toys’ on right and left side of keyboard.
  o Playing a passage correctly earns a friend at the high end of the keyboard
  o Playing a passage incorrectly earns a friend at the low end of the keyboard
  o Goal = get twice as many friends on the ‘right’ side than the ‘wrong’ side.
  o We know it best the way we practice it most.

We Become Experts Through Our Practice Habits
• If we practice with mistakes... we become an expert at playing with mistakes
• If we practice with pauses... we become an expert at playing with pauses
• If we practice with false starts... we become an expert at playing with false starts
• If we stop and fix things every time something happens... we become experts at stopping & fixing things
• Is this what the students wants to be an expert at?

Teaching Mastery
• If mastery is not possible, we’re asking for too much – break it down in attainable steps
• Does the student understand the concept?
• Demonstrate the concept, and ask student to raise their hand if they or hear/see it

Teaching Poise
• Manners
• Presentation skills
• Staying quiet while others perform
• Keep hands below neck
• Self-assessment – ask questions
Create A Social Network
- Group classes
- Recitals
- Outside events
- Back to back lessons – teach your students & parents to greet each other by name

Teacher Attributes
- Nurturing
- ‘Tough’ Love
- Have rules – what are they allowed to touch in your studio?
- Be involved with their lives and care...
- Goody box
- Enthusiasm and positive attitude
- Believe in every child’s ability

Is Music for Every Child?
- Students don’t fail. Teachers fail. Parents fail. Students don’t fail.
- Consider a 3–month trial if child is really young

Definite “Do’s”
- Wear washable clothes
- Speak eye-to-eye
- Find your inner child and let him/her come out

TMI
- Children often share personal things about their parents or family that aren’t meant to be shared, or ask inappropriate questions…. Change the subject as soon as possible!

In Closing…
- Love your students
- Nurture their parents
- Develop good human beings
- Reinforce good manners
- There is so much joy in teaching young children
- You are a mentor & role model
- Cherish your responsibility on influencing these young children....