

Finding True Love: Helping Your Kid Choose The Right Instrument

Nuns seated young Christopher O'Riley at the piano to keep him out of trouble. The Spokane Symphony's principal trombonist was handed the only remaining instrument in school band. What's the best way to help a child find the right thing to play?



Can you fall in love with the sound of a plastic recorder?

Whether it's learning saxophone in school band, taking Saturday piano lessons, or participating in a top-flight youth orchestra, there are tens of millions of kids in the United States learning to play instruments. Way back in 2003, Gallup pollsters figured that at least 84 million Americans play an instrument - and at least a third of those players were then between the ages of 5 and 17.

But for many families, there's still not a whole lot of infrastructure or easily tapped collective wisdom surrounding learning music, especially considering the **state of music education** in American public schools these days.

Sometimes, simple logistics seem to lead the way to true love of a particular instrument - whether a kid can reach a piano's pedals, for example, or if, in the case of an aspiring brass player, her or his adult teeth have come in. Ross Holcombe, a *From the Top* alum who is now the principal trombonist in the Spokane Symphony Orchestra, says that by the time his school band teacher got around to assigning him an instrument, the only option left was trombone. Marvin Brown, who appeared on *From the Top* at age 18, had his heart set on playing the double bass - but his desire was thwarted when he learned he wouldn't be allowed to take a bass on his school bus. He switched to the cello.

And you can't discount the influence of burgeoning hormones. Violist Matthew Lipman, now an undergrad at Juilliard, says that having crushes on two girls led him first to the trumpet, and then to the viola:

Occasionally, the sheer oddity of an instrument proves beguiling. Bassoonist Sarah Abraham, who's now 20, had never heard or seen her instrument until she was 13 - just three years before she appeared on *From the Top*. "I found it weird and complex," she recalls. "I remember it was about my height. It was totally foreign to me and therefore totally interesting."

From The Top host **Christopher O'Riley** says that it wasn't exactly *choice* that led him to the piano. "My mother taught me to read before kindergarten," he recalls, "and when the nuns at St. Athanasius in Evanston, Illinois, found out I knew how to read, they told my mother I'd be bored in kindergarten - and when kids are bored they cause trouble, and they didn't want any troublemakers." So, he continues, "they gave my mother an ultimatum: For \$15 a week I could either take private French lessons or private piano lessons. My mother thought I had some sort of musical talent because I could read the album jacket of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto in B-Flat Minor. She assumed I had perfect pitch, but I was really just reading."

Sometimes the match is simply kismet. Singer Nadine Sierra, who appeared on *From the Top* at age 15 and is now 24 years old, says she fell hard for opera as a very little kid. "I remember my mom brought home a VHS tape of *La Boheme* from the Met," Nadine says. "I kept watching it every single day and was so emotional about it. I thought, 'I have to do this, I just have to be like them.'" And she's done just that: four years ago, Nadine became the youngest soprano ever to win the prestigious Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions.

Taking part in "petting zoos" can be a fantastic and low-key introduction to many instruments as well: I probably would have never begun playing the violin myself if the Boston Symphony Orchestra hadn't been letting kids try out fiddles in the Public Garden on one warm summer day. A little bit of sawing back and forth on open strings, and I was sold.

However, it can also take a little musical meandering for a kid to find his or her niche. Listen to how oboist Yuga Cohler, who was 14 years old when he appeared on *From The Top*, drove his parents slightly batty before what he thought was his double-reeded destiny:

(However, Cohler wound up making yet one more major switch before finding his true calling. At the ripened age of 21, he's now a **conductor**.)

And that's the most important aspect of picking the right instrument: not trying to anticipate which one would garner the best chance of a college scholarship, or trying to discern which is the most popular choice among schoolmates and friends. If it's a "love match," the kid is more likely to stick with it. That's not to say that every day will be easy, of course - but if the child enjoys the sound and feeling of playing the instrument, all the better.

Finding The Right Teacher For Your Music-Loving Kid

Questions you should ask before the first lesson.



How do you match your child with someone competent, trustworthy and inspiring?

Once your child has zeroed in on the instrument he or she would like to learn, the next natural step is to find a teacher. For many families, that means scouting about for a good private instructor - which can be a challenge on lots of levels.

Asking friends and parents of your child's peers is a natural first step, but it doesn't have to be your only method. There are lots of ways to plug kids into your local music scene.

Don't overlook the local branches of national teachers' associations. Organizations like the [Music Teachers National Association](#), the [National Association for Music Education](#) and the [American String Teachers Association](#) can help you locate instructors. Many states also have their own music teacher associations; try an online search with your state or city plus the phrase "music teachers."

If you're thinking ahead - starting now to look for a teacher for the fall, for example - you might still be able to attend a prospective teacher's year-end student recital. This could give you a sense of the age group he or she most commonly works with, his or her point of view as an instructor and maybe even particular strengths. If it's a multi-age recital, it might also be a great opportunity for your own child to get excited about the music she or he might be learning down the road.

If your child's school or if your community has an orchestra, band or chorus, encourage your child to sign up. Not only are such groups a great way for your kid to meet new friends who share enthusiasm for music, but you'll start to build your own network of contacts, resources and locally sourced wisdom. In addition, school and community music teachers tend to have their own networks of private instructors to draw upon.

Local conservatories or colleges with robust music programs may also be a great place to locate a teacher. Many such institutions are glad to help connect current students and alumni with newcomers.

But how can you tell if a teacher is a great find? This presents a particular minefield for parents who aren't musically inclined themselves, or whose own memories of childhood lessons are occupied by boring old bats or sadistic, tough-talking taskmasters. (Or, you know, both.) Given the layers of mystery and even snobbery that all too often surround classical music, novice parents might wrongly assume that bad teaching is just the way things are supposed to be.

See if a prospective teacher allows a trial lesson to test how the personalities mesh. And be sure to ask lots of questions. What's the teacher's background as a musician and as an instructor? What kinds of teaching materials and music does she use? How much practice time is expected for students, and does that vary by the student's age? Does the teacher have access to student ensembles? What kinds of performance opportunities will he provide? Will the teacher allow the student to record the lesson? (This can be a terrific practice aid, especially when it comes to remembering how something is supposed to sound.) Does she teach any music theory or composition? What are the expectations for students and for their parents?

A good teacher can be a friendly, encouraging and inspiring presence - even when a student hits rough patches. He will point out the student's weaknesses without being harsh or dismissive, suggest innovative ways to overcome challenges, and create engaging ways to tackle even rote activities like playing scales or honing fine motor skills. The instructor's age and experience might or might not be a deciding factor. But what if you try out a teacher for a little while and you're just not sure it's a good fit? It's crucial to trust your gut. It's better to make a change sooner rather than later, especially if you feel like a teacher's experience, energy or approach just isn't right for your child. Sure, that will probably be an uncomfortable conversation, but isn't that preferable to wasting money, time and your kid's initial enthusiasm?

Keep in mind that the teacher who is ideal for a beginning student might not be such a perfect pairing several years down the line - and a great teacher will know when it's time to pass the baton along. As Emmanuel Cabezas, father of now 20-year-old cellist and *From the Top* alumnus Gabriel, remembers, "After Gabriel went through most of the Suzuki program, his teacher suggested a traditional teacher who also performed with a symphony orchestra. Once Gabriel studied with him for a couple of years, he in turn suggested another teacher from a university."

From The Top parent Roberta McGuire cautions, however, that when and if you as a parent trigger a teacher switch, you should be "honest with your wish to make a change. No one appreciates being blindsided." Plus, you never know just how small the musical world is - for all you know, your current teacher and the new teacher might just share a stand in your local orchestra!

Getting Kids To Practice Music - Without Tears Or Tantrums

Tested tips and tricks for boosting motivation and persistence, from homemade games to mindful practice logs.



How do you encourage your kid to practice with a smile instead of a scream?

When friends learn that my nearly six-year-old has been playing violin for three years, their voices shift a bit, especially if they also have a child learning an instrument. Two questions come in quick succession: "Does she like it?" and "How do you get her to practice?" There's a nervous energy to their queries, and usually a little laugh, too. Either they've been struggling with kids who have a hard time practicing, or they recall their own childhood boredom. And they seem to be relieved when I say that yes, she genuinely enjoys playing - but yes, practicing can also be quite a struggle.

Sometimes it's really a delight and a total breeze. My daughter glows with pride when she's figured out how to play something new, and she loves showing off what she's learned. But I have to admit that when we're having a bad day with it, I feel like I could get scarily close to channeling some inner **tiger mother**. Raised voice? Check. Threats of taking away treats? Been there. Slammed doors and crying? Um, yes. (Though that last is usually my child, not me.)

So today's entry in this week's **The Young Person's Guide to Making Music** series is about stuff I'm still mastering as a parent, as well as things I really wish I had known about effective practicing when I was a music student.

Regular practicing is a path towards self-discipline that goes way beyond music - it's a skill that has hugely positive ramifications for personal fulfillment and lifetime success. (How "tiger mom" is that?) But the trick is that self-motivated discipline isn't exactly first nature for most kids, so it's up to families to help create positive, engaging and fun ways to practice as a path towards self-motivation.

Having a goal for each practice session is essential, whether your child is practicing for five minutes or a couple of hours each day. *From the Top* alumna Ren Martin-Doike, a 20-year-old violist who now studies at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, says that her number one practice technique is to write down those benchmarks: "Set goals, hold yourself accountable to them and create a practice log you can be proud of!"

"The only way I have found to efficiently work efficiently on large amounts of different kinds of repertoire - solo, chamber, orchestral - is to have a premeditated plan," Martin-Doike continues. "For instance, I may decide to devote my first practice block to warming up, my second block to working on isolating difficult passages from a concerto, my third to putting fingerings in my orchestra part, my fourth to studying a new chamber work and spend my last block on playing through or stitching together the various smaller sections I worked on earlier in the day. By having a plan, I am able to maximize my time, juggle lots of different music and prevent aimless practicing or mindless playing through."

Martin-Doike's tip can easily be whittled down for younger and less experienced players. As a parent leading practice, your aim in a session of five or 10 minutes might be to help your child really work through just one or two bars of music. That also makes learning a big hunk of new music less intimidating.

Good practice is intentional practice, adds 16-year-old pianist Hilda Huang, who appeared on *From the Top* five years ago: "They say that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become a professional," she observes. "But of course that practice needs to be qualified. Ten thousand hours of intentional, focused and detailed practice makes someone a better musician, not 10,000 hours of goofing off."

Still, that doesn't mean endless hours of slaving away. "Think of it like athletic practice," Huang says. "Gymnasts have to perfect four- or five-minute routines, but they need to spend the training time wisely. Too much tumbling, and their joints and muscles take on injury and strain. Too little, and they fall off the beam. That's why every time the gymnast steps on the floor, it's one routine or one set of hyperfocused, intensive work. And then it's break time."

A couple of *From the Top* parents have created unique games to encourage their kids to practice. Charlotte Kufchak, mother of the now 20-year-old violist Rachel Kufchak, came up a crafty way to beat boredom. "We bought dried beans and some sparkly paint and had a lot of fun making the beans as colorful and pretty as possible," Kufchak says. "Then we paid the kids in beans for practicing. It was great - we never ran out of 'cash.' Each quarter-hour of practicing was worth a certain number of beans, and each child could save, exchange or spend their beans as they liked. We had a list of prizes like special treats, Legos, a \$5 deposit in their bank account or a symphony concert. The beauty of it is that it can be tailored to each child's needs and each family's budget and priorities. And the kids were willing to practice!"

You can even try game-ifying the actual practicing. Barbara Nakazawa, a Newton, Mass. flute teacher whose adult son, cellist Joshua Nakazawa, appeared on an early episode of *From the*

Top, has a handy way of avoiding the dreaded "just playing it through" syndrome. She calls it "three penny practice."

"You put three pennies on the left side of your music stand," Nakazawa explains. "On a troublesome measure, you play it once, and if you get it right, you move the penny to the right side of the stand. If you play it again and get it right, you put the next penny on the right side of the stand. If you play it again and miss a note or rhythm, then all three pennies get put to the left. You must play the measure correctly three times in a row in order to keep the pennies. The next step is to connect the troublesome measure to the measure before it and continue playing."

I've tried out Nakazawa's penny game with my own daughter, and she absolutely loves it. (Over time, a less expensive option might be a set of Zuki **practice beads** that clip onto a music stand, which I bought on the suggestion of my daughter's private teacher - and these have been a big hit as well.)

Or follow the lead of the mom of 17-year-old violist Eva Kennedy, who appeared with the Quartet Toujours on *From the Top* last year. She created a homemade board game to keep up interest:

Also, if you're having trouble coaxing your child into practicing, try doing it at a different time of day. In our house, the mood, and the amount of stuff we could accomplish in less than 10 minutes changed really dramatically when we switched from practicing in the early evenings to getting it done before school. Admittedly, our mornings are a bit more harried (like anyone wants that!), but for us it's paid off in spades. On the inevitable days when we wind up having to practice in the evenings, it's nearly always pretty hideous for all involved. But that's just my child's circadian rhythm. Your mileage may vary.

A couple of other things I've learned as a parent: Instead of packing up the violin after each day's practice, we leave the instrument and bow out all the time (albeit in a safe place), so that as our daughter goes about her day, she can pick it up and play whenever she likes. This way, it's as easy to grab as a book or a toy. And at the end of a practice session, we try to leave a bit of time for her play whatever she wants, usually her own improvisations. She also likes to play along with whatever music we've got going on the stereo, including broadcasts of *From the Top*; it's blissful cacophony.

But once a child hits a certain age, parents have to start turning the responsibility of practicing over to the budding musician. Judy Merritt, the mother of double bassist Edward Merritt (who appeared on *From the Top* in 2004), says that as her son grew older, the nature of practicing changed, as did her role: "Practicing went through phases because at first it was a Suzuki approach, which requires **active parental involvement** on all levels. Every evening was practice that we structured as parents until our children, Ted and Emma, were around age 12. At that point, they took over."

"By age 10 or 11, the child needs to learn that what you put in is what you get out. What your parents put in, *you* don't get out," says pianist Hilda Huang. "Have the child practice for however long he can concentrate or feel like he's accomplished something. Even better would be to have a goal, like 'I want to be able to play this passage by the time I finish practicing.' For the beginner, 10 focused minutes is perfectly acceptable. Older, more serious or experienced students might say they want to learn 10 lines of music, and maybe 40 minutes would do the job."

How Do You Encourage Your Kid Without Being A Crazy Stage Parent?

How do you avoid morphing into an evil taskmaster when encouraging your child to practice? Try applying positive peer pressure or stepping back gracefully, successful parents say.



If your child's happy and she knows it, then her practice time will surely show it.

The potential for parental overdrive lurks in every extracurricular activity. You don't need to go any further than your local T-ball or soccer field on any given Saturday morning to see that. But when it comes to making music, and maybe even classical music in particular, it feels like the level of competitiveness can rise even higher. (Thanks again, [Amy Chua](#)!)

Flutist Barbara Nakazawa, the mother of a *From the Top* alumnus cellist named Joshua Nakazawa, suggests an alternative to nagging. She recommends applying doses of positive peer pressure. "Have your child enroll in a chamber music class," she says. "It's true that band and orchestra are fun and social, but with chamber music, you have to really know your individual part and listen to the other players."

It's important not just to tell your child to practice but also to nurture and monitor learning and growing. "With chamber music," Nakazawa says, "they will not want to let the group down - and they will prepare their part. It is most important to let them find pleasure and magic in music. Chamber music is that magic."

16-year-old *From the Top* pianist Hilda Huang says that some of the best kind of

familial support isn't necessarily the obvious kind, like helping to finance lessons and instruments or shuttling kids to rehearsals. "Parents are best as cheerleaders and, of course, as loving parents," Huang says. "But some support, like the not-so-obvious things like providing quiet during practice, is always nice and comforting."

However, Hilda offers a note of caution as well. "Often, parents who are musicians themselves can get too caught up in their child's musical development," she says. "Living vicariously never did people too much good."

The other side of the coin is when parents don't play an instrument or sing themselves, but still want to be an active presence. Maybe then it's about sharing recorded music you love (in any genre), or going to concerts to learn more together; in the Suzuki model, parents are actually encouraged to learn the instrument along with the child.

In either case, it's important to focus attention on the kid's experience, and their perceptions about playing music. "What my children did with their musical talent and abilities was not about *me*," stresses Judy Merritt, mother of bassist and *From the Top* alum Edward Merritt. "It was about me understanding them, accepting them and providing support for them and their own musical journeys. No musical talent is ever wasted - it may just not take the form we want it to take for the child. And I as a parent had to be okay with that."

So how do you help the child see making music as a great creative outlet rather than as fuel in an (imaginary) ascent to the top? Judy Merritt has some wisdom that elevates performance from feats of rote muscle memory to a higher plane.

"My two very different musically gifted children have taught me that if the child feels the emotional expression, then playing and practicing will be about learning and perfecting the language of the heart. Playing will have more meaning," Merritt says. "The best musicians, whether children or adults, are the ones whose heads, hearts and bodies are all connected in musical expression."

But what do you do when one of your children decides to step back from pursuing music as intensively as he or she once did? How do you handle the transition gracefully, particularly if your child's sense of self has largely revolved around being a musician?

When one of her children decided to scale back from playing so much, Sarah Odhner (mother of *From the Top* alum violinist Ben Odhner) figured out a way of letting things wind down that reduced stress for everyone. "When one of our sons was 16," she explains, "he gravitated to non-musical activities and really did not want to practice viola. Nagging teens quickly turns toxic, so my husband and I decided to put him on a six-week plan.

"We outlined a minimal amount of practicing that we expected and told him that we wouldn't be giving him any reminders to practice. At the end of the six weeks, he had not fulfilled the minimum requirement, and he dropped the instrument." She notes that he still loves music, but wound up with a doctorate in chemistry.

How Do You Reduce Audition Anxiety?

ways to help your child play confidently for strangers when something's at stake.



The difference between being first sax and fourth is nailing the audition - and you can give your child the advantage of careful preparation.

"Judges and teachers are often looking for player with the most developed, solid technique as well as musicality and artistry," says 16-year-old pianist and *From the Top* alumna Hilda Huang. "Often, judges fall slack on the latter two, because the only thing they can really judge objectively - or the closest thing they get to objectivity - is technique. Therefore, it's important to have a piece that can prove that the musician is capable of a high level of technique. Other pieces can demonstrate the many facets of the musician's artistry."

Encourage your child to plan, plan, plan. He or she should begin by going over repertoire choices with his or her private teacher. It's good to focus on pieces that are squarely within the child's comfort zone, and a teacher can help advise about particular requirements. If the audition involves learning new material, help your child map out a schedule well in advance of the big day. Cramming at the last minute isn't a great idea at school, and it's no better in music.

Percussionist Molly Yeh, who appeared on *From the Top* in 2007, says that the big secret is "mock auditions, mock auditions, mock auditions. Practice auditioning in front of as many different people as possible. Wear the outfit you plan to wear, play the music in the order you plan to play it and be brutally honest with yourself about how you

played. Record yourself during these mock sessions - and then go back, listen and take notes on what you can improve."

Judges often start auditions with a few questions, from wanting to hear a bit of background to asking about the child's future plans and goals in music. Rehearse a few likely questions beforehand so your child isn't taken aback.

Your child might also want to experiment in advance with various relaxation techniques, from breathing exercises to yoga poses. When that adrenaline fires up, it's great to have mindful relaxation rituals to fall back on. Which ones actually work totally depends on the individual, so it's best to experiment first.

Do your best to make sure that your child gets a good night's sleep, lots of water and some nutritious food beforehand. (Many musicians swear by the ritual of eating a banana about half an hour before playing, claiming it's a natural beta blocker. Who knows?)

You may want to encourage your child to dress cleanly and neatly, thus showing respect for the judges' time and effort. Avoid being too fancy, though. Chances are your child won't feel 100% relaxed and physically comfortable in dress-up clothes. And be sure to allow *plenty* of time to combat traffic, find parking and locate somewhere to relax, warm up and shake off any lingering nerves. Auditioning is hard enough without arriving breathless and disoriented.

In an audition, there might be anywhere from one to more than a dozen people listening to your kid play. Encourage your child to walk into the audition room with confidence and positive energy - and before she takes that walk, tell her that you love her and that she's done a great job getting ready.

Huang adds that local competitions and auditions often mean that your child will be up against people he knows. "You're there because you want to play your best, not because you want to deal a knockout to the rest of the competitors," she says. "Chances are, many of the other competitors will be your friends. You don't want to punch your friends, right?"

When the time arrives, Yeh says, put on blinders and just focus: "Don't listen to other people play - you'll either give yourself a break because you thought they didn't sound good, or you'll get more nervous because you thought they sounded good. Just play exactly how you prepared."

And if it doesn't go the way your child wanted? Yeh says, "Just know that every single successful musician on the face of the planet has experienced disappointment."