

SUMMER PRACTICE

Repetition is one of the most basic learning techniques. So when a student is trying to master a new skill, such as playing the piano, it is unwise to take an extended period of time off. Students lose knowledge and technical ability. Attention and enthusiasm levels wane. So if you have chosen to give your child a break from piano lessons over the summer, do not allow him to stop practicing, even though it might be more difficult to motivate him to practice when he does not have a weekly lesson to prepare for. Here are some tips on how to practice when several weeks go by between piano lessons.

1. *Help your child establish a practice routine.*

Generally, I recommend that students practice according to the following schedule:

Beginners (5-6 years old): 10-15 minutes/day, 5 days/week

Elementary (7-11 years old): 20-30 minutes/day, 5 days/week

Intermediate (12-15 years old): 45 minutes/day, 5-6 days/week

Advanced (16 years and older): 60+ minutes/day, 6 days/week

Keep in mind that students are more likely to adhere to the schedule if they practice at the same time every day. My nine-year old son, for example, studies both piano and violin, and he practices both instruments first thing after breakfast every morning. But he is not taking violin lessons this summer. So while he is keeping up his daily piano practice, we have agreed that he will practice the violin every other day, or three days a week. A sticker chart on the refrigerator provides a little extra incentive. But his primary motivation is this: he has learned from experience that the longer he goes between practice sessions, the more frustrating practice becomes. The same is true for the piano.

2. *Help your child make the most of his practice time.*

HOW MUCH a child practices isn't as important as HOW he practices. A student can accomplish more in thirty minutes of concentrated practice than he can in two hours spent playing the piano with the mind wandering. Encourage your child to break up a 30-minute practice session as follows:

2 minutes—warm up

5 minutes—work on technique (scales, arpeggios, cadence chords)

10 minutes—work on new pieces

8 minutes—polish continuing pieces

5 minutes—review repertoire (pieces that have been memorized)

3. *Allow your student to experiment and explore.*

After your child has completed his assignments, let him have some fun! Toss out the name of a familiar song and ask him to pick out the melody by ear. Suggest that he play

a piece he already knows, but in a different way. Encourage your child to make up a song of his own. Or if you have old music books lying around, challenge him to choose a piece, discover how much of it he can already play, and work out the rest.

4. Provide enrichment activities.

Let's face it; what students really want to do during summer vacation is PLAY! And I have found some music websites that are so much fun, your child may not even realize that they are educational! Listed below are a few of my favorites.

Flash Notes and Flash Intervals
<http://www.pedaplus.com/games.html>

Arts Alive Music
<http://www.artsalive.ca/en/mus/index.asp>

Play Music
<http://www.playmusic.org/>

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Kids
<http://www.bsokids.com/>

Dallas Symphony Orchestra Kids
http://www.dsokids.com/2001/rooms/DSO_Intro.html

The New York Philharmonic Kidzone
<http://www.nyphilkids.org/main.phtml?>

The Music Lab from the San Francisco Symphony
<http://www.sfskids.com/templates/splash.asp>

So work with your child develop a productive practice routine, and help him as much as possible to stick with it. The payoff will come in August, when he will be impatient to return to my studio and share his music with me—including, perhaps, and improvised rendition of *John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmitt*, a theme and variations on *Jingle Bells*, or a totally original composition (actual experiences I have had with real students). Together, we can make summer practice fun AND effective!