

Notes for parents about the “Parent’s Daily Dozen” practice chart

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The “Parent’s Daily Dozen” practice chart was developed in response to a discussion in 2001 on the Suzuki-Chat e-mail list about what teachers can do to help parents gain better skills at being a practice coach or “home teacher.” One parent—who was in considerable distress at that moment—said that she wished there was a practice chart for parents. Bingo! The idea was born. Vicky Barham of Ottawa and I volunteered to draft a parent’s practice chart, and this is the result. After being discussed and revised via Suzuki-Chat, it was tested at various Suzuki Institutes and in several teachers’ studios, with both teachers and parents reporting that it was useful.

I would like to ask you to use this chart for 8 weeks. During the “parent time” in group class, we’ll discuss how it’s working for you. The spaces under each item are for you to jot down any comments, questions, or reminders to yourself. There’s a streamlined version (without the extra spaces), that I’ll give you after you’ve used this one for two or three weeks.

Some general notes about practicing

For most children younger than about 12, taking music lessons and learning to play an instrument is primarily the parent’s commitment. Some children are enthusiastic, some are not. No child is aware of the challenges ahead. Every child needs the parent’s consistent, loving support to meet those challenges day after day.

The first year is the hardest. You may encounter some rocky times—you may even regret that you got started! Hang in there! If things get really rugged, phone me or phone an experienced parent to get some ideas and encouragement. During the first year, we are not so much teaching the child how to play the violin as we are teaching the parent to understand how your child learns . . . not how children in general learn, but how your own child learns best.

In Suzuki violin practice, the relationship of the parent to the child is very much like the parent/child relationship in learning to cross a street. At first, the parent has total responsibility, and the child has none—the child simply goes along for the ride, in arms, in a stroller, or in a backpack. Gradually, however, the child begins assuming more and more “street-crossing” responsibility—first by holding the parent’s hand instead of being carried, and then by walking beside the parent without holding hands. At some point, the child learns to look for cars and helps decide when it’s safe to cross, and so forth. As the years go by, the parent very gradually relinquishes responsibility to the child.

Violin practice is the same way. **You will “carry” your child for a long time**—maybe weeks, maybe months, maybe years. You will see to it that the practice happens and you will ensure that the environment is positive, (although you can certainly enlist your child’s help). If you and I do our jobs well, then, little by little, your child will take over responsibility. By the time your child is 12 or 13, he or she will likely be practicing independently, and—I can promise you this—you will look back and feel that it was worth the effort.

Some specific notes about the “Parent’s Daily Dozen”

Please let your child hear the Suzuki book level recording a minimum of three times each day (about an hour in total). *Daily listening is the single factor that is most strongly correlated to a student’s success in a Suzuki program.*

Make practicing a routine event that happens at the same time every day. Pick a time when your child is reasonably alert but also calm. In most families, it’s best to set a practice time *as early as possible in the day* so that if it doesn’t happen, you still have time left in the day to do it. It’s also a good idea to tie practicing to another inevitable daily event—“After lunch, we practice.” *The hardest part of practicing is getting the violin out of the case and making it ready to play.*

Find a special corner of your house where you can keep the things you need—violin, Suzuki book, your notebook, music stand, music dictionary, electronic tuner, metronome, whatever “gear” you use. You will be spending a lot of time in this space, so make it inviting and special: add a vase of flowers or put up some photos of composers and violinists—including your child!

Before the practice starts—earlier in the day, if you can—jot some notes about what you plan to accomplish. If it helps you to use a practice task chart (for your child), by all means do so.

1. Children often dislike changing from one activity to another. A bit of warning helps smooth the way: “In 10 minutes, it will be time to practice. Find a stopping place in your book/game/puzzle.”
2. If you aren’t in the habit of bowing to begin and end your practices, it may feel awkward or unnatural the first few times. That’s OK. Just do it anyway. If you have any questions about why Suzuki students bow to their teacher and their parent, please ask me.
3. A parent’s attention is a precious commodity for a child. Practicing together gives you an opportunity to offer undivided attention to your child every day. Your child will take cues from you about the value of practicing. If you give it only a quarter of your attention, your child is not likely to develop much commitment to it, either. (Use common sense, of course. You’re not expected to ignore the urgent needs of a younger sibling or let a pot boil over!)
4. The key word here is effort. You are acknowledging effort—not achievement. (Achievement will come through effort, and never without it). You can show appreciation non-verbally by smiling, nodding, giving a “thumbs up,” applauding, tapping your foot or swaying in time to your child’s music, or closing your eyes and listening intently.
5. **This is the real key to productive, contented practices.** Your child is working hard and, at times, really struggling. He or she will get discouraged and frustrated from time to time. Your child has a limited understanding of the process; you are the adult, and are able to take a longer view. A “one-point practice” means that you focus on *one thing at a time*. Avoid, for example, saying, “That was pretty good but your wrist was bent and the C# was too low and your pinky was straight on the bow and you’re supposed to use stopped bows and you forgot to play the repeat.” **OVERLOAD!** Instead, pick the *one thing that will make the most difference in the child’s* playing. This may well be something that was emphasized in the lesson. If you’re not sure what to focus on, start at the top of this list and work down: (1) balanced playing position, (2) beautiful tone, (3) perfect intonation.
6. Many children get frustrated when they feel that they don’t have any control over the situation. Give your child every choice that you reasonably can. She doesn’t get to choose whether or not to practice, and whether or not to play F# in tune, but she can choose which review piece she wants to play first, and whether she’d like to do scales at the beginning or end of the practice.
7. Any time you are focussing on tone—on the beauty of the sound—you are practicing tonalization. I will usually assign a specific practice for tonalization.
8. Book 1 students review every piece every day. I’ll give review lists to students in Book 2 and up.
9. As often as possible, end the practice when the child is happy and enthusiastic, or end it with something the child especially likes to do.

The last two items on the chart are for you and your child to summarize the day’s practice. You can use this space in any way you like. You might want to rate the practice on a scale from 1 to 10, or give 1 to 5 stars (like a movie review). The space for your child’s comment is extra big, so that your child can draw a happy face, put on a sticker, or write a few words—whatever seems appropriate.

VIOLIN PRACTICE ~ A PARENT'S DAILY DOZEN

Name _____ For the week of _____

1. *Listening*—I played the recording today. (How many times?—show a tally or a number.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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2. *Setting a practice time*—We agreed in advance on a time for today's practice (☐). We practiced at the scheduled time (S) or at some other time (O).

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3. *Preparing*—I prepared for today's practice by . . .

- gathering the equipment and materials we need,
- consulting the notes I made at the last lesson, and
- making a list, plan, or practice chart.

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4. *Initiating the practice*—I gave my child some warning before calling him/her to practice.

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5. *"Bracketing" the practice*—We began and ended our practice with a bow.

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6. *Giving practice a high priority*—I gave our practice time a high priority. I gave my child my full attention, and did not answer the phone or do other tasks during practice time.

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7. *Offering encouragement*—I expressed sincere appreciation for my child's efforts, both verbally and non-verbally.

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VIOLIN PRACTICE ~ A PARENT'S DAILY DOZEN

	For the week of _____						
Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. <i>Listening</i> : I played the recording _____ times today.							
2. <i>Setting a time</i> : We agreed in advance on a time for today's practice.							
3. <i>Preparing</i> : I prepared for today's practice.							
4. <i>Initiating the practice</i> : I gave my child warming before practice time.							
5. <i>"Bracketing" the practice</i> : We began/ended our practice with a bow.							
6. <i>Parent's priority</i> : I gave our practice time a high priority.							
7. <i>Encouragement</i> : I expressed sincere appreciation for my child's efforts.							
8. <i>Positive environment</i> : I created a positive environment for practicing.							
9. <i>Giving choices</i> : My child made choices about how/what to practice.							
10. <i>Tonalization</i> : Our practice included tonalization.							
11. <i>Review</i> : Our practice included review (/ = partial, ☑ = complete).							
12. <i>Ending the practice</i> : We ended the practice on a positive note.							
PARENT'S SUMMARY: What was today's practice like?							
STUDENT'S SUMMARY: How did your practice partner do today?							
STUDENT'S SUMMARY: How did you do today?							