

How to Get the Most Out of Piano Lessons: Ten ways parents can help their child progress in their music studies

1. Invest in a quality instrument

Having an inadequate instrument can hinder your student's technical growth. Make sure your beginning piano student has daily access to an acoustic piano or an 88-key, weighted keyboard. Having a keyboard smaller than 88 keys or without a pedal limits the repertoire your student can perform. If your student begins on a keyboard and continues for over a year, seriously consider investing in an acoustic piano. Practicing on an acoustic piano will allow your student more depth and breadth of sound, enabling them to learn new techniques required for more advanced music.

2. Create an environment conducive for practicing

Try to place your instrument in a room away from foot traffic and noise. For example, it is hard for a student to concentrate on practicing when the TV is on and his siblings are playing tag around the piano. Make sure the room has adequate light for reading music. If the student will be practicing in the evening, you may need to purchase a lamp for the piano. Also, make sure the student has a bench or chair at the appropriate height. Having too low of a seat can lead to incorrect technical habits. Use a cushion or a book for extra height to make the student's forearms level with the keys.

3. Perform maintenance on your student's equipment

Taking care of your acoustic piano will prolong its life and allow your student to play on a fully-functioning instrument. In Michigan, pianos should be tuned twice a year. If a key or pedal stops working, call a piano tuner; most tuners also repair pianos.

Also, check to see if your student's other equipment is in order. Is your metronome broken? Is the power cord missing to the keyboard? Is your piano light bulb burnt out? Did your dog eat your lesson book? Replacing broken or damaged equipment can give your student the tools to succeed.

3. Schedule the student's practice

Students thrive on routine. Make piano practice an important part of your day. For some families, this means setting apart a certain time of day or allotting a certain amount of time each day for practice. The goal is to make piano practicing a habit so that music-making becomes a life-long pursuit.

4. Consult the assignment book

Many students who come unprepared to a piano lesson did not read their assignment book during the week. The assignment book contains a list of which pieces to practice and how to practice them. Check this notebook if you are unsure of what your student should be practicing at home.

5. Support the teacher's instruction

During the lesson, the teacher is an authority figure for the student, providing purposeful musical instruction. During the practice time, the parent can assist in the learning process by confirming what the teacher assigns and explains during the lesson. It is detrimental to the learning process and confusing to the student if the parent frequently changes the student's lesson assignments and contradicts the teacher's instruction. Piano teaching is a team sport, requiring instruction from the teacher, practice from the student, and support from the parent. If any one member of the team is not doing their part, musical progression will slow significantly.

6. Encourage your student to try new things

Trying new activities helps students grow. Students who participate in events like recitals, competitions, or Student Achievement Testing usually progress more quickly because they have a goal to work towards. Encourage your student to participate in at least one activity per semester.

7. Bring your student to lessons

Although it sounds strange, piano students need to attend their scheduled piano lessons. In our busy lives, other activities and events can crowd out piano lessons, making it hard for the student to attend their weekly lesson. But skipping lessons frequently can greatly hinder the student's musical progress. This is especially true in young children, who may not be able to retain information from a lesson last month without weekly reinforcements.

8. Assist your student with their practicing

This is especially important with beginning students, transfer students, and very young students. Although the teacher explains how to practice at the lesson, she does not come home with the student to help them practice. Assist your student with practicing by going over the practice tips written in the assignment book and setting practice goals for your student. For example, ask your student to "play this piece three times" or "practice for 15 minutes." Remember, quality practice is better than quantity practice, but quality is not accomplished without quantity.

9. Make music a priority

One of the primary reasons students discontinue piano is time. Today, student schedules are overflowing with so many activities that they do not have the time to practice. This results in unprepared lessons and little or no progress at all. The lack of improvement creates discouragement with the music lesson. To make the most of piano lessons, students and parents will need to commit time out of their schedule, not just for weekly lessons, but for daily practice. If your student is unable to practice more than once or twice during the week, you may need to reprioritize the student's activities or even discontinue piano lessons until an appropriate time commitment can be made to the study of music.

10. Make music enjoyable

Excitement is contagious! If you as a parent are excited and encouraging about your student's practice, recitals, and musical activities, the student is more likely to enjoy them. Having a musical "cheerleader" can make all the difference when your student is working on a difficult piece. Emphasize how fun and rewarding music-making can be!