Practice Time Can Be Fun!

By Ruth Engle Larner, Suzuki Violin Teacher in Colorado

“But, Mommy, I don’t want to practice!” How many times do even the most dedicated Suzuki parents hear this? And how many times are teachers asked for the magic cure for this complaint?

Harkening back to my days as a Suzuki violin student, I can recall those episodes when I just didn’t want to take time out of my busy life to practice. This was in the 1970’s, and I don’t remember being enticed to practice with all the inventive games and charts we use today. It was simply expected, and if not done, the consequence was “no more lessons.” And I can remember my mother helping me realize what would be missing in my life if I didn’t play the violin: no more group classes with my friends, concerts, or summers at Stevens Point.

Over the years since then, as a Suzuki violin teacher, I’ve had plenty of opportunity to explore this problem when parents have asked for ideas to inspire their children to practice. I’ve referred them to the numerous good books and articles that have been written on the subject and encouraged them to attend workshops and institutes, and we have held discussion groups of our own to share ideas.

Now, as a Suzuki violin mother, I find myself face-to-face with my 4-year old son who sometimes tells me in no uncertain terms, “But Mommy, I don’t want to practice!” What a wonderful chance for me to apply all the advice I’ve given to so many other parents! I have acquired a new appreciation for Suzuki parents, seeing how tricky it can be to keep coming up with fresh ideas for daily practice sessions. I’m thoroughly enjoying the challenge and feel thankful that I have a teacher’s training and background for this task.

When I saw that my son Alec was not always going to come happily bouncing into the studio for his practice time, I realized he thought practice was his choice. And when we was busy with something else, he could choose not to practice. At his young age, Alec has a lot of choices – what game to choose or which toy to play with next. It seemed that he thought of violin in the same context. Ah! So the first step was teaching him that violin practice is a responsibility. It got added to his “responsibility chart” (along with getting dressed, helping clear the table and picking up toys). Many times children just want to know what is expected of them. They may push their boundaries and question us, but they like having those boundaries. Fortunately, Alex has always been very responsive to rules and structure, so it was relatively easy to be consistent in doing daily practice. However, it didn’t make practice fun, and I wanted Alec to enjoy his music-making. More progress is made with happiness and love, than under duress.

Having established my expectations and his responsibilities, I started brainstorming practice ideas that would grab his imagination and utilize his interests to draw him into the fun and learning. What follows is a list of practice games that we’ve used. Some are original and some are gleaned from years of contact with other parents and teachers. Not every idea works for every student, and no idea works all the time for any student. We’re all in constant need of refreshing our “bag of tricks” to stay on top of the practicing game.

(Continued on Page 2)
**Basket Pick:** Giving the child some feeling of control over the practice session can be very helpful. I write on colorful slips of paper all the things we need to practice, put the slips in a basket, and Alec draws a slip to determine what to do next. This is also a lot of fun in group class, if it’s sized so that everyone has a turn drawing.

**Magnet Puzzle:** Alex’s violin teacher, Ellie Albers LeRoux, did this in his lesson and it was such fun, we went out and bought a puzzle for my studio. Each puzzle piece has a metal tack in it and a magnet on a string “fishes” for them. I attached the magnet strip to the tip of a dowel stick bow and have the student practice making a nice bow hold while fishing for the puzzle piece. The magic part of this game is that the teacher/parent can read “invisible” words on the back of each piece that “disappear” when the student looks at it, telling what the student needs to do next. As a variation, sometimes I actually do prepare the puzzle with assignments on sticky notes on the back of each puzzle piece.

**Board Games:** Candyland and Chutes & Ladders entered our lives this past year and provided a good incentive to take a turn after every assignment practiced.

**Practice charts:** We have done the standard sticker chart, which sometimes gets stickers, sometimes gets checkmarks, and sometimes gets bright highlighter marks. While Alec has been learning to write his letters, he enjoys printing the appropriate letter for each song in the square for that day of practice.

**Votive Candles:** Children are fascinated with candles, especially blowing them out. One day, I decided to set my votive candles all around in the studio, light them, and let Alec blow one out after each piece he practiced. It was an enchanting atmosphere and kept him going for almost 45 minutes!

**Sticky Notes:** What a wonderful invention! I keep sticky notes of all sizes, shapes and colors in my studio, and have found a myriad of uses for them in teaching and in practicing. In this game, I write each assignment on a separate sheet of sticky note and let Alex stick them up in the order he prefers. When a note has been done, he sticks it to my shirt, decorating me! When doing this as a teacher, with a student, I let them take the notes with them to continue the game at home.

**Floor Puzzle:** We have several very large floor puzzles, which when put together are three feet square, or form a six foot long train. Alex likes using these for practice time by choosing a piece to add to the puzzle after each piece he practices.

**Practice candle:** This candle is a tall, thin taper, which is burned during each practice session until it is gone. The longer you practice each day, the quicker it is gone. Then a pre-determined reward can be given. I haven’t used this with Alec yet, but did pass out candles to my students several years ago, and it was quite successful. Some enjoyed it so much they have repeated the activity on their own.

**“I can play it anywhere” game:** I have done this for years while teaching as a fun way to get more repetitions done. Alex also enjoys it for practice time. First, I make sure he understands and can successfully do the task. Then I ask him to play it in different spots in the room – by the door, in front of the mirror, sitting on the floor, for Dr. Suzuki’s picture, out in the hall, lying on the floor, with eyes closed, etc. At any time, if an unsuccessful repetition is played, we start back at the first spot and go again.

**Dice game:** Another fun way to get repetitions is by rolling dice. I keep a mug with colorful, many-sided dice in my studio. The only rule is that if it lands on “1” he rolls again, and if it lands on “0” I get to choose a number! I’ve

(Continued on Page 3)
had students want to keep rolling and playing this game long after I was ready to move on – it’s that much fun!

**Finish the picture:** Capitalizing on Alec’s love of stories and his active imagination, I set out a blank piece of paper and crayons at the start of each practice time. After each task he completes, I will draw a small part of the picture. He loves to guess what the whole picture will be when it’s done, but is still fascinated to see how I’ll draw it and whether he guessed right. Some pictures are complicated enough that it takes several practice sessions to finish them.

**Surrogate teacher:** Sometimes it overwhelms Alec when I poke and prod and correct. So out comes Cookie Monster or Mickey Mouse or Moose or Bear. One of these fun characters takes over my job of checking on the bow hold, the highway of the violin, the violin hand form, the finger intonation, etc. This has been a great way to bring fun into playing correctly. I have found Alex willing to do what the character teacher asks of him, even after having refused to do it for me!

Alex is practicing consistently now, not always needing games or rewards. But when he does need them, or when I am just in the mood for being creative, it adds fun for both of us. We’re more relaxed and open to learning. Relating enjoyment to the study of music is invaluable as a student grows. I hope others find these ideas useful. Perhaps they may spark to your imagination for even more ways to approach the age – old challenges of practice time.

---

Congratulations to the following students and their teachers for having been selected for the Spring II Honors Recital:

- **Annie Amen**, piano student of Beth Turco  
  Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23 by Frederic Chopin

- **Kevin & Nolan Nguyen**, piano duo students of Richard Tostenson & Nancy Daley  
  Slavonic Dance in G minor, Op. 42, No. 8 by Antonín Dvořák

Listen to their performances:  
Friday, May 19, 2017  
7:30pm in Antonello Hall

---

**STRING ORCHESTRA STUDENT AUDITIONS!**

Orchestra Auditions will be held on **Saturday, May 20 and Sunday, May 21**.

On audition day, please arrive at least 20 minutes early to check-in with Heather VanderLey in the fourth floor lobby of MacPhail, tune and warm-up in the assigned room for your orchestra. This will ensure that you are ready to play at your scheduled time. Bring your audition comment sheets to your audition, you will receive these from your private teacher.

This audition is a required part of your orchestra placement process.  
All auditions will be completed by Sunday, May 21 2017.
UPCOMING EVENTS
Friday, May 19, Suzuki All Instrument Department Recital, 6:00 pm, Antonello Hall
Saturday, May 20, Suzuki Flute and Harp Group Class Final Concert, 10:30 am, Antonello Hall
Monday, June 5, Joe Kaiser Suzuki Cello Studio Recital, 4:30 pm and 6:00 pm, Antonello Hall
Sunday, June 11, Kelly Lehr Suzuki Violin Studio Recital, 1:00 pm, Antonello Hall
Monday, June 12, Susan Sophocleus Suzuki Piano Studio Recital, 6:30 pm, Antonello Hall

CONGRATULATIONS!

Elliot Burt, Completed his “Lightly Row” Chart

Natalie Christ completed 200 days of listening and practicing!

Roshni Flannery completed 600 days of listening and practicing.

Gaby Pascoe performed her Suzuki Piano Book 3 recital, pictured with her teacher, Beth Turco.