

Teaching & Reaching the Middle School Level

by Mike Fraley

Even under the best circumstances, middle school students can present special challenges. Below are some techniques and tips that I have found valuable when working with this unique group between the ages of 10 and 14.

Sincerity - Middle school students do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. They can be very good at judging sincerity and character. If you're going to teach at this level, it's mandatory that you enjoy it! Strive to maintain a positive, sincere rapport with all students and their family members.

Make it fun! Yes, students will have to learn rudiments and practice things that are sometimes boring and repetitious. Find ways to make it fun and challenging. Remember that you are working with an age group that is bombarded with endless, fast-paced, high-energy computer games, television, movies and entertainment. Believe it or not, you are competing with the other activities in a child's life. Make lessons at your studio or participation in your band program exciting and rewarding, and you'll be a success.

Social tendency - Middle school students are very social and can be sensitive about what their peers think of them. It may sound obvious, but make sure that your studio or band program reflects positively on them as members!

Curriculum - Have a sound curriculum and make sure you identify reasonable goals. Set high standards while building solid foundations and fundamental skills. A lack of foundation and fundamental skill is the biggest weakness I see in young percussionists, and this is what ultimately will be a burden to their future musical progress. Some private studios give lessons that are of the "cookie cutter" variety, offering the same program for everyone. Have a focus and an objective. What are the essentials that every student should know? What does the student want to learn? Middle school students in grades 6, 7 and 8 are uniquely different with distinct needs and abilities. As a result, you need to tailor your teaching style and expectations accordingly. Finally, middle school students can have a tremendous appetite for new material and ideas. Be prepared to supply it.

Organization and routine - Middle school students are infamous for being disorganized and lacking focus. I use the following with my students: "By failing to plan and organize yourself, you are planning to fail." I require each percussion student to buy and maintain a stick bag with appropriate sticks and mallets. The new Vic Firth EP1 and EP2 are outstanding. Ensure that all students get off to a good solid start with proper equipment. Anticipate lost or forgotten books, sticks, mallets and notebooks. Don't get mad or upset. Instead, keep an extra supply of everything to loan. In a busy studio or school program, take something for collateral such as a shoe, book bag or money to ensure your materials will be returned.

Establish sound guidelines on practice routines and lesson schedules. Where, when and for how long should students practice? Students need to practice, and at the same time they need to be considerate of other family members and neighbors. What are the alternatives to practicing on acoustic instruments? As educators, we need to help assess each situation and suggest creative solutions to help them achieve their goals.

Keep them busy! I don't know a middle school teacher who, at one time or another, hasn't had a problem with the percussion section. This dilemma is more prevalent in middle school because not all middle schools have marching bands and/or jazz ensembles for the percussionists to focus their energy on. As a result, performance outlets are limited to the school concert band or garage band. If you teach from a private studio, perhaps volunteer to do a percussion ensemble or masterclass - a great recruiting vehicle. If you are a director, encourage older high school students to come back to help at the middle school.

Encourage solos and small ensembles. They are excellent opportunities for young per-cussionists to stay involved. Consider having all percussion students select and perform a solo for a festival or recital. There is an abundance of rudimental solos with piano accompaniment that are fun to play and are excellent teaching pieces. Don't forget the mallet, timpani and multi percussion solos. Set kids up for success, know the literature and know what works. If you can guide them towards appropriate pieces in a positive manner, you and your program will be a winner! Form a rudiment club. With a simple wall chart you can turn rudiments into a fun contest, seeing who can check off on the most rudiments first. Middle school students love fun, fair competition.

In closing, I hope I have laid out some ideas that you may find beneficial in your particular teaching situation. Middle school is a unique experience and offers a rare chance to ignite kids and turn them on to the incredible power of music. Good luck and have fun!

Mike Fraley is an active teacher and performer in the greater Miami, Ft. Lauderdale area. He received his B.M. in Jazz Studies from New England Conservatory and his Masters in Education from Florida International University. He is currently the Director of Music at Boca Raton Middle School in beautiful Boca Raton, Fl. He has been named "Teacher of the Year" and nominated for the "Disney American Teacher Award". In 1996, he was recognized as the statewide recipient of the "Outstanding Young Educator Award" given annually by the Florida Jaycees. His ensembles have consistently earned the highest ratings at the Florida Bandmasters Association "Performance Assessment Evaluation".