

# Developing Healthy Practice Habits

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The number one question I'm asked these days is, "how do we get our students to practice?" The answer isn't simple. Getting children to engage in routine practice outside of class takes time and patience and there's no magic solution. My hope is that you will find this article and its included resources helpful as you work to develop healthy practice habits in your own students!

## Non-Skilled vs. Skilled Activities

Kindling a desire to practice outside of class starts by helping your students understand the difference between non-skilled and skilled activities. Non-skilled activities include texting, surfing social media, and watching endless hours of streaming video. These activities do not require skill and therefore can be enjoyed without prior experience. Skill-based activities such as playing a music instrument or participating in team sports require skill. To enjoy these activities, you must develop skill.

Once your students understand that playing an instrument is a skilled activity and skill is necessary to enjoy playing their instrument, the next step is help them understand that practice is required to gain experience. The more they practice, the more experience they gain. Then, experience turns to skill and skill turns into long-term enjoyment!

Practice ⇨ Experience ⇨ Skill ⇨ Fun!

## The Weekly Practice XP Chart

I was sitting at my work desk one afternoon in 2014 after a particularly difficult trumpet sectional trying to find a way to effectively communicate to my students why we practice when

I had a spark of inspiration.

## What if we related practice to experience points (XP) like in video games?

In almost all computer, console, and mobile games, the more you play the game, the more experience points (XP) you acquire. Those with the most experience points (XP) are typically the most successful gamers. Game developers use XP to keep you hooked into the game. It was at that moment that I came up with the first version of the Weekly Practice XP Chart.

The Weekly Practice XP Chart is concrete and simple. You take the number of days you practiced and subtract the number of days you didn't practice. The result is your number of XP points for the week. The more XP you have, the more skill you've acquired.

The great thing about the Weekly Practice XP Chart is that it provides children with the flexibility to pick a practice plan that works best for them. Most children join band just for fun. Others join band wanting

to be the best at their instrument. Regardless of their aspirations, there's a place for everyone in band, and the Weekly Practice XP Chart can help them understand the routine effort necessary to achieve their goals. Since 2014, I've been encouraging my students to practice between 4-7 days a week to ensure that they are moving forward and staying up with their assignments.

## You Can Lose XP

After discussing the Weekly Practice XP Chart with your students, the first question you'll probably get is, "how is it possible to lose XP?" It's important to teach our students that the acquisition of skill is not permanent. As with all skilled activities, when we don't practice our skill, we lose skill over time. I usually say—

"If you don't use it, you lose it!"

To help your students understand this concept, engage them in group discussion about skill acquisition and loss. Ask them to tell you about something they used to be able to do that they stopped doing and have them

tell you what happened when they stopped. Sometimes they'll recall a sport they used to play or a game they once enjoyed. Some of my students have even recounted losing the ability to speak a foreign language they once spoke fluently as a

	DAYS PRACTICED	-	DAYS NOT PRACTICED	=	EXPERIENCE POINTS (XP)	
PRO	7	-	0	=	+7 (XP)	😊
BEST	6	-	1	=	+5 (XP)	😐
BETTER	5	-	2	=	+3 (XP)	😐
GOOD	4	-	3	=	+1 (XP)	😐
	3	-	4	=	-1 (XP)	
	2	-	5	=	-3 (XP)	
	1	-	6	=	-5 (XP)	
	0	-	7	=	-7 (XP)	

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young child. Talk with your students and help them understand how practice relates to skill acquisition and loss.

### XP Adds Up Over Time!

Once your students understand the Weekly Practice XP Chart, the next step is to help them understand how XP adds up over time. Using math, you can explain how someone who practice 6 days a week will earn 260 XP in a year! Someone who practice 4 days a week will only earn 52 XP in a year. Then ask them, “which player do you think is going to be better at their instrument?”

My Experience with Practice Records

I stopped using practice records after introducing the Weekly Practice XP Chart in 2014. While they may work for some, they weren't working for me. I personally felt like the practice records were encouraging some students to be dishonest to make the grade. Even worse, many kids just didn't turn in their practice records! I was tired of fighting dishonesty and apathy. I felt our energy was better used educating them on healthy practice habits.

It's also important to note that we simply stopped using practice records without a replacement document to track practice. Instead, we focused on guiding our students to develop healthy practice habits with the Weekly Practice XP Chart and regular classroom discussion. I can clearly remember the conversations we had in our band office at the time. We were concerned that eliminating practice records would “destroy our program” and “no one would ever practice again!” What happened was completely the opposite! The kids were happier and began freely engaging in authentic practice of their own choice.

It is my personal belief that it isn't necessary for every child to practice 7 days a week. I did encourage them to practice daily in the week or two leading up to a big performance. However, in general, I wanted them to

practice between 4-7 days a week so that they were earning XP, developing skill, and engaging in play outside of class. I also encouraged them that 5-6 days a week was the “sweet spot” if they were wanting to get maximum results without burning out!

### Resources for Your Classroom

I've created two additional resources to help you develop healthy practice habits with your own students! Scan the QR Code on the right to download your own high-definition copy of the Weekly Practice XP Chart. You can even print it for your own classroom! Several of the schools I work with have this chart enlarged into poster-size and have found it helpful!



I've also produced a short 10-minute YouTube video summarizing the talk I used to give to my students every year in Beginning Band. I made this video for fellow educators to use as a resource to show to their students. Scan this QR Code to access the video!



### Conclusion

Getting children to engage in routine practice outside of class takes time and patience. The Weekly Practice XP Chart is a modern method to help your students develop healthy practice habits that is simple and proven effective over a period of 8 years. Both our 2018 TMEA CC Honor Band and 2019 The Midwest Clinic ensembles were brought up using this method. What our students liked most about this method was that it provided them with the necessary information to make their own decisions and understand that their musical development was entirely in their own hands!

*Rob Chilton currently works for Williamson Music 1st as the creator and videographer for the digital music theory program, RC Theory. Prior to working with Williamson Music 1st, Chilton was the Director of Bands at Killian MS in Lewisville ISD from 2014-2021. Before that he was the Director of Bands at Myers MS in Denton ISD from 2013-2014 and the Associate Director at Rice MS in Plano ISD from 2007-2013. Bands under Mr. Chilton's direction have consistently earned 1st division ratings at UIL and have been named “Best in Class” and “Most Outstanding Band” at various North Texas music festivals. In 2018, the Killian MS Honors Band was named the TMEA CC Honor Band and in 2019, performed at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago. Additionally, the Killian Honors Band was named a National Winner in the Mark of Excellence National Wind Band Honors Project in 2015 through 2019. In 2021, Mr. Chilton was named Killian Middle School's Teacher of the Year. In 2014, he was named Southern Methodist University's Young Music Educator of the Year. Mr. Chilton has presented for the TBA and TMEA conventions numerous times. Mr. Chilton holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Southern Methodist University where he had the opportunity to study music education under the tutelage of Lynne Jackson and Brian Merrill.*