

Tips for New Band Parents: Helping Your Child Practice

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Parents of beginning band students often ask me how they can help their kids with practicing their new instrument. While many parents don't hesitate to step in and help their kids with subjects like math or English, many parents feel uncomfortable stepping in to help their kids practice because they feel as if they aren't qualified to do so. Regardless of a parent's experience with a musical instrument, there are five things that every parent can do to help their kids have better practice sessions.

1) Help your child establish (and maintain) a regular practice schedule.

Young musicians need to practice daily in order to establish solid muscle memory on their instruments. **I suggest that beginning band students practice at home for a total of 180-210 minutes per week (which averages to about 25-30 minutes a day).** Practicing at home is ideal due to the likely distractions that students will be exposed to when they practice in the classroom before or after school.

Create a weekly school and activity calendar with your child and help them to carve out practice time.

2) "Supervise" and hold your child accountable.

Stay within earshot of your child when they practice. Young musicians often become distracted during practice sessions and can end up doing other things while the practice timer keeps ticking. This is especially true nowadays when tuners and metronomes are readily available as a smart phone app.

When you hear prolonged silence, step in and see what is going on.

After a few months of beginning band, you'll begin to notice that your child has some favorite tunes that they *love* to practice! While you will (understandably) start to tire of hearing the *Ode to Joy* melody on repeat for days on end, know that this is a great sign that your child is nurturing their love for music and their new instrument!

Young musicians will often spend their entire practice session playing their favorite tunes, so encourage them to spend most of their practice time tackling new tunes/exercises and working on music that's less familiar. They can always spend some extra time after their practice session jamming out on their favorite band tune!

In most cases, it's reasonable to expect to hear between 3-5 unique tunes and/or exercises for a 30-minute practice session.

3) Encourage your child to focus on fixing mistakes.

If you hear your child making repeated mistakes in their music, encourage them to isolate the problem spot and practice slowly. You could even suggest that they practice naming the notes or counting the rhythm of the trouble spot (these are concepts that they will be taught as a beginner).

4) Make sure your child uses a metronome.

The metronome is a device that musicians use to keep a steady pace

when practicing music. Make sure that you hear the metronome playing when your child practices. This will ensure that they are spacing the notes in a song evenly, which is essential in playing cleanly and confidently. If you don't hear the music "syncing" properly with the metronome (trust me, you'll know!), encourage your child to decrease the speed on the metronome until they find a speed at which it is easy to stay in sync. Increase the tempo incrementally—just a few beats at a time—in order to play the passage both cleaner and faster.

5) Check in with your child's band director.

Check in with your child's band director a few times each year to learn about your child's progress in band. The band director will be able to illustrate your child's unique strengths and opportunities for growth. Their director will also be able to provide insight on how your child can adapt and modify their practice sessions as they continue to improve and begin reaching for bigger musical goals.

Dr. Andrea Harrell is a Band & Orchestra Product Specialist for D'Addario & Co. and works exclusively with their Woodwinds and Orchestral brands. Before her move to New York, Harrell served as Adjunct Professor of Clarinet at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas and taught clarinet for several of Texas's leading band programs, including Hebron High School, L.D. Bell High School, and The Woodlands High School.

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