

SUZUKI PIANO STUDIO

Parents' Guidebook

Your guide to mother-tongue piano lessons — and your role in them.



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LISTENING

Before you begin Suzuki lessons, I'll ask you to observe lessons in my studio and begin listening to the recordings at home. Listening will become the cornerstone of your piano life, and the Book 1 recordings are **fundamental** at this stage. You wouldn't expect your child to learn to speak without hearing other people speak, and you can't expect them to learn to play piano without hearing what they're going to play.

So, what makes a good listening routine? Develop the habit of playing the Suzuki repertoire at every opportunity. Have it in the background at mealtimes, whilst playing games, when you're in the car, during bath time — anytime at all. This isn't about sitting down and paying conscious attention; it's about playing the music so much in the background that it seeps in and becomes a part of you. When children come to their lessons they do well and find it easier (and more enjoyable) when they automatically recognise the pieces we're working on.

- **Enjoy the music.** You might think this is tedious right now, but young children love repetition and familiarity. How many times have you been pestered to read the same book, play the same game or sing the same song over and over again? They will love the comfort of their familiar Suzuki songs playing at home. Point that out to other family members too if they're tempted to voice their "oh no, not that again" opinions!
- **Have the recordings readily available.** The Suzuki books come with a CD, and you can download recordings from iTunes, Amazon or Spotify too. Make sure you have the music on your phone, your laptop, in CD players around the house and wherever else you play music. It's easy to have access to music everywhere now, so don't let logistics stand in your way.
- **Sing along** with the recordings. Once you've heard them for a while they'll be familiar, so you and your child can hum along. I can send you lyrics for each of the songs too.

LESSON OBSERVATIONS

Your first real interaction with Suzuki piano, before you even start your own lessons, will be lesson observations. The important thing to remember is that observation is passive. I'm not expecting the children to sit attentively watching all the way through another child's lesson. Instead, come along with a book, a jigsaw, or any other quiet activity your child enjoys and do that in the studio. They'll be soaking up how we do things, what we do during lessons and what their music sounds like without anyone really noticing.

Coming into the studio during other students' lessons is a vital part of learning the piano, for several reasons:

- It **normalises** everything. The children and you can both see that I go into the same kind of detail with everyone.
- It **reassures** you that you're not the only one finding something difficult. Everyone has challenges and we're all working at things at our own pace.
- It **reinforces** the lessons you're paying for (observation is free lesson time!) because both you and the children see and hear things being played and taught from a different perspective. A new concept you might find difficult can be observed many times, making the new learning much easier.
- It builds **community**. The more often students and parents are together, the more the bonds grow. Parents say they're particularly glad of this at two stages: the early years when it all feels very new and difficult, and the teenage years when young people might otherwise shy away from lessons — but with their Suzuki friends around, piano is still relevant to them.

Once you have observed lessons for a while, I will start teaching the person who will primarily be responsible for bringing the child to lessons and supervising practice. We will look at the Twinkle Variations and some early pieces. The child will observe you practising these at home, which means you can guide their practice in the home environment. Some parents continue to have lessons long after the early stages — so if you enjoy it, why not continue?

BOWING

We bow at the beginning and end of all Suzuki lessons. You may wonder why?

- **Respect.** The first and most obvious reason is as a sign of respect between student and teacher. It works both ways — we bow together. Interestingly, in martial arts, where the bow is also an important symbol, they bow with heads raised and never take their eye off their opponent. In music we look to the floor — another sign of respect and trust between us.
- **Boundaries.** It marks the beginning and end of the lesson. Once we’ve “bowed in”, children know the teacher is now in charge; when they bow out, they have a clear message that the lesson has finished. This is especially important to establish in our early lessons so that young children don’t feel conflicted. In lessons they listen to my instruction; during home practice they listen to yours. From the time we bow in, your job is to observe and take notes so you can replicate the work at home. There are two exceptions: I might ask you to join in with something — if so, please do so with enthusiasm — and occasionally a child responds well to a quick parental reminder to listen or focus.
- **Performance.** It’s practice for performances, whether that’s for family at home, a mini concert in the studio or a recital at a public venue. Happy, confident presentation is key to an enjoyable performance, and that’s “topped and tailed” by a bow.

Bowing at home: why not add bowing to the beginning and end of your practice sessions? That mark of respect and clear demarcation really helps establish the routine. Once you’ve bowed in, the child knows you’re there for them 100% (no phones, no distractions — practice time is sacred one-to-one time), and once you’ve bowed out they know you’ll respect the rules and not suddenly decide “oh, one more thing before we finish”. Once practice is done, it’s done.

THE SUZUKI TRIANGLE

Students are never alone with Suzuki lessons — and neither are parents, or teachers.

We form what's known as the Suzuki Triangle, working alongside and supporting each other all the way. This isn't a relationship that just magically happens, though; we must nurture it. Here are some ways we develop an effective triangle:

- You observe and record what happens in lessons and **practise the same way at home**, establishing yourself as the vital bridge between teacher and child.
- I work predominantly with your child during lessons, but when I turn and ask "Did you get that in the notes?", rather than being patronising, I'm reinforcing for your child's benefit that **you and I are working together** and that you're well equipped to help with practice at home.
- We **smile and encourage** your child together. By working in harmony we both genuinely celebrate when your child achieves something. "Hasn't that Twinkle hand improved!" evokes far more pride when parents are in the room to share it.
- I'm **available** between lessons. Ask me about anything you're not sure about. First we make sure you have clear notes before you leave, but you can also get in touch between lessons for help, clarification or reassurance. I get a focused 20–60 minutes with your child once a week and I'm trained for it; you get into a routine of daily practice for the rest of the week. Especially at the beginning that can be challenging, so remember — you're part of the triangle, and I'm here to support you as well as teach your child.

PRACTICE

Every lesson I'll give you very specific instructions for how to practise at home. It's vitally important that you follow those instructions and repeat those specific actions at home every day. Here's why...

Musical ability is an acquired skill — shaped far more by nurture than nature. Short, frequent practice beats long, occasional sessions every time. For beginners, two 15-minute sessions a day is usually plenty.

- Your child needs to **be prepared** when they arrive at their next lesson. It helps their confidence and enjoyment, because when I ask them to play, they know they can achieve what I'm asking for.
- We make **progress**. I can only move on to the next step when previous steps are mastered. There are no shortcuts. If steps haven't been practised, I have to spend the lesson doing them again — essentially doing the practice in the lesson. Nobody wants the same lesson repeatedly (or to pay for that privilege).
- The way I teach relies on **starting with the known** and moving to the unknown. We make music all the time in lessons, playing things children feel comfortable with, and providing well thought-out, manageable next steps. If students haven't repeated their lesson points daily, they find lessons stressful. By practising daily you give them the gift of that comfort zone.
- It's a **hobby**. There are many reasons for choosing music lessons, but you chose piano for the enjoyment of the instrument. Establishing a daily routine makes it part of your child's life.

The **single best thing** you can do to guarantee a successful outcome is to agree and stick to a regular time slot for practice — before school, after dinner, or any other time that can be devoted to piano. Make it part of your day and it will become part of your life.

Practising music that's not Suzuki? Yes please! Children should be encouraged to play music that isn't in the Suzuki repertoire — but never at the expense of the Suzuki music. It works best at the end of a completed Suzuki practice, or coming back to the piano later in the day once the daily objectives are ticked off.

NOTE TAKING

If you're going to practise effectively during the week, you're going to need good lesson notes to guide you. I'll always sum up what we've been working on at the end of a piece, so you can get a clear idea down on paper. If you're not sure what to practise, how to practise it, or why, please ask. You need to be practising in a precise way with your child — those tiny details we repeat in lessons need to be repeated daily at home.

Good note taking is a skill, and it takes time to nurture. In the early days you might leave the lesson thinking you understand something, then realise your notes aren't clear enough. That's OK — get in touch and we can sort it out. Don't waste a week's practice for want of a quick email or phone call.

So, what does good note taking look like?

- Write down the **details** of what you saw so you can repeat it at home.
- Take a short **video** of the skill in question. Some things are hard to put into words, so record it on your phone to watch later.
- **Review your notes** shortly after the lesson — perhaps transfer them onto a practice chart. Ask me and I'll give you one.
- Ask me for **clarification** if you're unsure what to practise, how to practise it, and why.

TWINKLE VARIATIONS

Twinkles are the first thing you learn at Suzuki lessons (whatever instrument you learn), and they are the bedrock of everything you learn afterwards.

Why emphasise the Twinkles so much? Whatever instrument you learn, you need technique to enable you to play — your ability to get around the instrument in an easy, agile and sophisticated way. In Suzuki music it's the Twinkles that develop technique. Beginning with the first flicking / stroking action (just one at a time at first) we build up to the multiple strong sounds of Variation A (Piccadilly Circus), the soft sounds of Variation C (Strawberry Raspberry), the contrasting sounds of Variation B (Please Squeeze Me) and the purest legato in the Twinkle Theme.

We don't stop there, though — the Twinkles are now used in all aspects of your playing:

- They warm up the fingers at the beginning of practices.
- They are tools to use when practising new pieces or sight reading.
- They continually advance your technique (quicker, lighter, stronger, better-balanced sounds).

It is said that most of the skills you need for the whole of Book 1 are learnt in the Twinkle Variations, and most of the techniques needed for the rest of the Suzuki repertoire are mastered using Twinkles too. So pay good attention to your Twinkles and take care of them by practising them every day. Focus on *how* you're playing them and the *sounds* you're making.

REVIEW

When you get established with lessons and have some complete pieces under your fingers, I'll start setting review tasks every week. Review underpins everything we do in Suzuki / mother-tongue teaching.

If ever you're wondering what's the point of reviewing "old" pieces, remember that when we learn to talk we keep repeating all the "old" words whilst adding new ones to our vocabulary. Learning piano isn't just about collecting new pieces — it's about mastering a musical vocabulary. Notes come out stilted and with difficulty at first, the same as words did, but repetition after repetition improves fluency. So smile, be patient, and enjoy watching your child's playing develop.

Some advantages of maintaining repertoire and reviewing pieces:

- It's **fun** to play pieces you know well.
- Because you have **mastery** of earlier pieces, you know you can succeed when a new piece feels difficult.
- The same **skills** come up over and over, so practising them in earlier, easier pieces means you have them at your fingertips later. By the time you learn a Mozart sonata, you're already fluent in the relevant skills.
- It's **sociable**. Children can meet up with friends and play together because they all know the same pieces, and at workshops they play along with people they've only just met.

GROUP LESSONS

I provide group lessons for children of similar ages and abilities. These are a great opportunity for children to have fun with their peers. I schedule around two lessons per term, and it's essential you make as many as you can. They last between 30 and 45 minutes and are held in my piano studio.

Group lessons are a great way to develop musicianship and musicality through group and peer learning. In later stages we'll cover theory and music reading — but the emphasis will always be on having fun.

Whilst the children are with me, parents can be in another room. It's a great opportunity to talk and share struggles, successes and strategies over a cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit.

TERMS & CONDITIONS

Fees & Payment

Lesson fees are paid monthly. I teach **34–35 lessons per year**, and the yearly total is split into 12 equal monthly payments, keeping payments consistent and predictable throughout the year.

Invoices are sent every month, including August, even though no lessons take place that month. I send each invoice about a week before the month it covers, and payment is due by the 1st of that month for the lessons that follow.

LATE PAYMENT

If an invoice hasn't been paid by the due date, I'll send a reminder. Please settle it promptly — the studio runs on these payments arriving on time.

If a Lesson is Cancelled

If I ever need to cancel a lesson, it will always be rearranged or refunded. If a pupil misses a lesson, the fee is normally non-refundable — however, I know life happens, so each pupil has **one make-up lesson credit per academic year**.

Once that credit has been used, further missed lessons cannot be rearranged, credited or refunded — including lessons missed through illness, holidays booked in term time, or a school term that differs from ours. **Group lessons cannot be made up at all**, and are not refundable: the group is a fixed course booked for the whole year.

None of this is meant sternly. The timetable is built as a whole year and every slot is spoken for, which is why the rule has to be firm. If something significant happens, come and talk to me.

Term Dates

Lessons generally follow Lambeth Council term dates, but due to training commitments they sometimes have to be adjusted. Dates will be sent out a year in advance. Occasionally I may offer extra lessons during the holidays if families would like them.

Stopping Lessons

If you decide to stop lessons, **a full term's notice is required — around four months**, and fees remain payable for that notice period. Slots are timetabled a year at a time, so a place that empties mid-year usually stays empty for the rest of it.

Please tell me as early as you can, rather than at the point the decision is made. The earlier I know, the more likely I am to fill the slot.

Instrument Requirements

To make good progress, students need access to a suitable instrument at home. Ideally this means a well-maintained acoustic piano; a weighted, touch-sensitive digital piano is acceptable, but only as a (very!) temporary solution. Students also need a proper adjustable piano stool or chair, and a footstool for younger children.

I'm always very happy to help with recommendations and advice if you're unsure what to buy. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

Photographs & Video

I sometimes take photographs and short videos at group classes, concerts and studio events, and use them on the studio website, in newsletters and on studio social media. Enrolling assumes your consent to this.

If you would rather your child was not included, simply tell me and they won't be.

In writing is best so I have a record, and you can change your mind either way at any time. Video recorded in a lesson for your own practice use is always fine and needs no permission.

The Apps & Your Child's Information

The studio practice app holds your child's first name, their practice and listening records, the pieces they are working on, and any notes passing between us. The Term Times site holds first names against lesson dates. Both are used to teach your child and for nothing else — never sold, and never shared with anyone outside the studio.

You can ask me at any time to show you everything held about your child, to correct it, or to delete it.