

Peers, Tension, and More
Reflections on Suzuki Parents
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As a child, I studied traditional piano, which means that for the better part of twelve years, I attended every single piano lesson on my own. During that time, I have scant memories of my parents ever talking with my piano teachers. They had obligatory rushed conversations following performances, but other than that, it seemed my parents had very little connection to my instructors. When I began teaching piano at the McGill Conservatory in the late 1970s, I followed the pattern from my childhood – I taught students who attended lessons on their own. When students arrived for lessons with their parents, I politely ushered parents out of the studio, explaining that my goal was to create an environment where students were responsible for their own learning, even though I knew that wasn't the whole story. The real reason for my wanting parents out of the studio was because I worried parents would find my teaching to be inadequate, that they would be critical of my limited teaching experience.

Thirty years later, as I look back on my transition from a traditional piano approach to a Suzuki teacher's mindset, I'm grateful for Dr. Suzuki's model of welcoming parents into the Suzuki triangle – always smiling and appreciative of the privilege to share another musical journey. What I'd like to do in this article is to focus on the various pivotal encounters, conversations, and observations that have helped me to sift through and sort out what works and what doesn't work when it comes to the Suzuki triangle of students, parents, and teachers. I start with a question that came up early in my teaching career – Who is the parents' most practical resource? Then, I continue with three dynamic themes teachers may need to tell parents about. On this reflective and informative journey, I travel through conversations with colleagues, memories of Dr. Suzuki, and insightful stories from my students and their parents.

Who is the parents' most practical resource? At a conference many years ago, I got together with a Suzuki colleague for an informal conversation. When I asked what stood out as a *light bulb* moment in her teaching that year, my colleague replied, "I've noticed that the students, whose parents make friends with other parents in my studio, always seem to do well." I nearly fell over with astonishment. I'd noticed precisely the same phenomenon in my own studio without ever

making the connection between parent peer relationships and student success. My colleague's observation made perfect sense because more than any one else, parent peers would most likely understand the difficulties and the rewards parents experience in their child's learning to play a musical instrument. Another parent would understand what it's like when children don't want to practice, when children declare they equally hate the piano and their parents, when everyone is fed up with listening to the recording. Another parent would know what it feels like to overcome obstacles and celebrate the child's musical achievements.

This astute observation had an immediate impact on the resources I provide for parents. Recognizing that parents need recurrent opportunities to develop parent peer relationships, I incorporate two things. Firstly, during the Parent Intro Course that precedes students' first lessons, I make sure parents get to know each other – exchanging phone numbers or email addresses – and I continually reinforce the resource they are for each other, pointing out how one parent's insight has meaning for another. Secondly, during my students' twice-monthly group classes, I send the parents off to chat, sometimes giving them reading selections (Dr. Suzuki, Barbara Coloroso, etc.) to stimulate discussion, knowing that their conversations will twist and turn through matters important to them that I cannot foresee.

What's resonant in parent peer relationships is that parents bring meaningful hands-on experience into their conversations. By talking about their experiences, parents take stock of the conflicts and celebrations, problems and solutions that are part of daily life, that come with their child's learning to play a musical instrument. Of course, there are other meaningful resources for parents – such as teachers, or grandparents, or in-laws. However, parent peers offer a uniquely beneficial perspective because they operate "in the trenches", they actively live through the genuine challenges and pleasures of raising children.

What else might parents need from the teacher? During my thirty-year career as a Suzuki Piano teacher, three dynamic themes have emerged in their own unique way – sometimes slowly with much thought and deliberation, sometimes spontaneously and almost surreptitiously. Each one of these themes has a fundamental connection to the real life experiences of working with parents and their child's learning to play a musical instrument.

Acceptable Tension – Some time ago, I asked my student Jonathan to write me a story about a boy his age learning to play the piano. It was only a matter of minutes before Jonathan handed me a sheet of

paper with his story *The Challenges of Piano*. It's a story I've never forgotten, because in his story Jonathan revealed something quite remarkable – that learning to play the piano is difficult, that learning to play the piano is easy, and that focus, practicing, and having fun can have a huge impact on any student's progress. Jonathan's story of a boy learning to play the piano managed to capture an idea that's been behind my teaching for over three decades. It's an idea I observed in Dr. Suzuki's teaching. An idea I think every parent – if they don't already know about it – needs from their teacher. An idea I refer to as *acceptable tension*.

It occurs to me that parents – and perhaps teachers as well – sometimes get caught in the trap of attempting to make things easy for children. They buy into a certain logic related to children's safety, wellbeing, and self-esteem that supports making things easy, because, of course, making things easy for children is a good thing to do. But, isn't there more to children's safety, wellbeing, and self-esteem than just making things easy? During my three-year apprenticeship in Japan, it was virtually impossible to ignore Dr. Suzuki's enthusiasm for what I refer to as *acceptable tension*, because he was always taking students just slightly beyond their comfort zone. Playing with the bow upside-down. Start and stop playing while the tape continues. At times, it seemed there was no end to the challenges Dr. Suzuki could think of. So, when I graduated from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute, I started teaching by following Dr. Suzuki's example of taking students just beyond their comfort zone. Playing with eyes closed. Keeping the beat with one hand while playing with the other. Of course, I always include making things easy for my students. But, more importantly, I'm also looking just slightly beyond my students' success to consider what's next. What's the next appropriate *acceptable tension*?

What I appreciate about the idea of *acceptable tension* is the reminder that learning to play a musical instrument isn't a smooth trajectory without ups or downs. Learning to play a musical instrument naturally involves conflict, upsets, tension, and opposition. My job as teacher is to make sure the *tension* is always at an *acceptable* level, that disagreements are manageable, that upsets get resolved, so that learning to play a musical instrument is satisfying and rewarding. In this way, learning to play a musical instrument isn't a sanitized problem-free process, it's a journey in which students, parents, and teachers frequently move through the *acceptable tension* involved with stepping just slightly beyond the comfort zone.

When it comes to what parents need from me as a teacher, I know that most likely parents have already encountered tension in raising

their child. Consequently, I encourage parents to figure out how *acceptable tension* fits in with what they want to pass on to their child, with the vision they have of their child in adulthood. And I make sure parents can differentiate between *acceptable* and *unacceptable* tensions. My point is that some tensions are more valuable than others and being able to respond appropriately to tensions or conflicts is an essential component in Dr. Suzuki's emphasis on "noble hearts and minds".

Stick-With-It-Ness – Several years ago when I asked a group of parents what they felt their children got from learning to play the piano, one particular answer captured my attention. A father replied, "My daughter has learned that she can get things done, that it might take her a week, or a month, but she'll get there if she just keeps on going." It was a simple observation that spoke volumes about the patience, reflection, perseverance, repetition, and commitment required in learning to play a musical instrument. It echoed a sentiment that I've always enjoyed sharing with my students and their parents, the idea that learning to play a musical instrument involves something I refer to as *stick-with-it-ness*. Now, given the impact of the 21st Century's outstanding technological advancements, the experience of *stick-with-it-ness* might be more necessary and more important than ever before.

One of the biggest challenges facing all of us in the 21st Century has to do with instantaneous achievement – the notion that we can get what we want just by clicking a button, whether it's the microwave, the TV remote, or the computer. On the one hand, it's easy to appreciate the convenience of recent technological advancements. Unfortunately, on the other hand, the immediacy of those very same technological advancements can give individuals a false impression of active involvement, while inadvertently promoting subtle levels of impatience and intolerance for activities that require more than the click of a button – like learning to play a musical instrument. That's where *stick-with-it-ness* comes in, because *stick-with-it-ness* is all about intentionality and participating in the process.

Stick-with-it-ness is concerned with individuals engaged in ongoing exploration. Personal involvement and ownership are involved in *stick-with-it-ness*, as well as success and failure. And individuals create their own desired outcomes as active participants, rather than as passive button clickers. But, there's one more thing about *stick-with-it-ness* that everyone needs to know – that *stick-with-it-ness* on its own is never enough, because, unfortunately *stick-with-it-ness* can take you both closer towards and further away from the destination you have in mind. It means that *stick-with-it-ness* isn't merely a blanket

application or blind guarantee. The success that comes with *stick-with-it-ness* also depends on figuring out where you are, where you want to go, and whether what you're doing is helping you to get there. As Dr. Suzuki pointed out, "There are industrious people in the world who make great efforts, play much every day, and yet fail to refine themselves" (*Where Love is Deep*, page 46). In other words, it's not enough just to be busy, to be making efforts. Rather, it's a matter of recognizing what's working and what's not working, and using *stick-with-it-ness* to get where you want to go.

What I want parents to know is that they can help their children immensely by encouraging them to *stick-with-it*. (Interestingly, research by Gary McPherson at the Melbourne Conservatorium reveals most students quit music lessons a year after their parents stop reminding them to practice.) Of course, children can get headed in the wrong direction, but part of any effective learning process is recognizing obstacles, acknowledging when you've reached a saturation point, and getting comfortable with change. *Stick-with-it-ness* is all about supporting the child's long-term journey – especially in terms of genuine parental encouragement that advocates and empowers the child's ownership, intentionality, and meaningful musical exploration.

Why? – Finally, in order to add another layer to parents' understanding of their child's musical journey, I share my response to the question – Why learn to play a musical instrument? While current educational experts may focus on brain activity, discipline, problem solving, and other related topics as the most salient reasons for learning to play a musical instrument, the answer I prefer moves in a completely different direction. And it has a lot to do with a parent's remarks when I inquired into how parents felt after learning to play a few pieces in Suzuki Piano Volume One. One father replied, "Last night I must have practiced Cuckoo for an hour, never got it perfect, but the whole time I just couldn't give it up. I can't wait to get back!"

Somehow, this father's perceptive summary succinctly addresses the reasons why people learn to play a musical instrument. His remarks echo Dr. Suzuki's own understanding, "*The real essence of art turned out to be not something high up and far off. It was right inside my ordinary self*" (*Nurtured by Love*, page 94). We learn to play a musical instrument because of how we feel when we connect to music. Music ignites something deep inside every person. No matter how much time we spend at the instrument, no matter how difficult or easy the piece, no matter whether or not we finish learning a piece – we go back for more because music reminds us of who we are. That's why we learn to play a musical instrument. That's what we're hoping to pass on

through the Suzuki Method – the inexplicable and irresistible synergy that comes by actively connecting with music. It's something that goes beyond music as a passive recreational activity. It's the active spiritual dimension of music so near to Dr. Suzuki's heart. It's a powerful theme on my list of things Suzuki parents may need their teachers to share with them.

Joyful Journeys – This article began with my own anxiety as a novice teacher in regards to parents' participation in their child's learning to play a musical instrument. Thirty years later, what stands out for me is that parents bring their own vast knowledge of life and relationships to the Suzuki triangle. They come with curiosity about learning and an interest in their child's musical journey. My goal is to tap into parents' considerable insight, while recognizing it's my responsibility to help parents meaningfully expand what they already know about life and relationships. This means that I return parents' invitational gestures by welcoming them – much as Dr. Suzuki would – into richly satisfying and joyful journeys of learning.

What I appreciate about the explorations in this article is how they all serve as reminders for me as a teacher. There are reminders to listen to the vital stories parents have to tell, reminders that challenge me to consider how I attend to *acceptable tension* and generate strategies that stimulate *stick-with-it-ness*. But above all, there's the reminder of what music really does. It's the reason why music is so important to teachers, parents, and students – because musical involvements accomplish something quite extraordinary. Even without our knowing it, musical adventures pull each of us to consider not only our own sense of self, but also what we have yet to imagine about ourselves, about each other, about music, and about life! That's what it's all about!

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