

FAQs for PARENTS of SUZUKI STRING STUDENTS

a. WHAT IS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE SUZUKI CURRICULUM?

"Recognize progress, but value the process." From a pedagogical standpoint, in Suzuki Books 1-4, the basic technical foundation (i.e., tone production, posture) is being laid down for the more advanced repertoire found in Books 5-10 and beyond. It is for this reason that Book 1 may seem to go especially slowly, but come Book 4, most students will typically excel, which results in no filler pieces between Book 8 and Books 9-10. In Books 5-8, additional and more advanced technical preparation for the Mozart concerti in Books 9-10 and repertoire beyond the Suzuki books is put into place. This is also the time to refine technical skills in preparation for advanced repertoire.

In addition, the Suzuki method encourages students and parents to take advantage of 4 different learning environments to maximize your child's learning and overall music experience. They are:

- Private Lessons
- Group Lessons
- Workshops or Music Festivals (during the school year)
- Institutes (during the summer)

b. WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR REGARDING LEARNING NEW PIECES?

There are 3 levels to learning any piece (overall time spent polishing the piece differs from student to student):

1. Memorizing notes and bowings
2. Mastering the technique (or skill) of the piece—this one usually takes the longest to perfect
3. Musically expressing the story of the piece

c. WHY IS MY CHILD *STILL* ON THE TWINKLE VARIATIONS?

It is not unreasonable for beginning string students to spend up to 2 years or more on the Twinkles. Although that may sound like an excessive amount of time spent on learning such "simple" sounding pieces (the function of the Twinkle Variations is that of challenging bow etudes), the advantage to spending this length of time on perfecting the Twinkles is that students are set up very well technically to succeed when presented with more advanced pieces. Students who start out slow in the beginning (on Twinkles) usually surpass their moving ahead peers later in not only pieces, but in technical ease of playing.

d. WHY IS BOOK 1 TAKING SO LONG?

Moving slowly through Book 1 is TYPICAL. It is not uncommon for students to spend 2-4 years in Book 1 (and at least 1-2 years of this on the Twinkle Variations & Theme alone). Obviously, there are many factors that contribute to a "fast" or "slow" progression through Book 1. As your child's teacher, it is one of my primary objectives to lay out a solid technical foundation in Book 1, so that we do not have to fix technique later when the repertoire becomes more difficult. It is for this reason that I am very meticulous about how polished each piece is, and that bow exercises are being done daily if possible. The advantage to teaching in this manner is that students will accelerate and sound better when we get to more advanced pieces.

That said, try to remember that violin study is not about which book number your child is in or even what piece number they are on. This is not important in the grand scheme of things. Neither you, nor your child, should ever place an emphasis on where they are in books/pieces in comparison to other students. Violin study is not a race or a contest. It is a matter of your child developing and progressing at their own rate of progress and succeeding as best they can without the negative effects of a competitive viewpoint.

e. WHY IS MY CHILD ONLY LEARNING SEGMENTS OF PIECES AT A TIME AND NOT THE WHOLE PIECE ALL AT ONCE?

Unit training (or learning a piece in sections) is important! The more detailed a student is regarding practicing these units through repetition and for mastery of the units, the more efficient the development of their technique will be. Also, it is much easier to tackle a challenging piece in sections rather than all at once; especially knowing that students have much more to

be thinking about than just the notes (i.e., foot posture, bow hold, watching the bow on the string, fingers on the tapes, etc.) String instruments are the most challenging instruments to learn in comparison to any other instrument.

f. WHY DOES MY CHILD HAVE TO DO BOW EXERCISES DAILY?

Overall, the primary goal of bow exercises is for ease of playing through a relaxed bow arm, which results in more resonant tone production. That said, students who are concentrating intently on doing their bow exercises accurately daily should have no problem with keeping their bow close to the bridge (which is where the best sound on the instrument is produced). If the teacher ever mentions that your student's bow is not near the bridge (or you notice so at home while practicing with your child), this is most likely an indication that your student's bow hold while practicing at home each week needs improvement. Focus on encouraging your child to "mindfully" do their bow exercises accurately and with a correct bow hold. Additionally, if the sound being produced by the instrument is not enough into the string (lacking depth in sound), then more bow exercises are needed to help increase strength and flexibility in the bow arm.

g. WHAT IS REPETITION AND WHAT IS THE VALUE IN DOING REPETITION?

Repetition is NOT a punishment or a threat. When working with your child on something that requires repetition, strive to make it meaningful (i.e., use an abacus to count; give pennies for incentives; sticker charts for younger students; coloring charts or sheets for coloring in the good repetitions, etc.). Give feedback every few repetitions so that your child is actively thinking about what to do and listening to what they are doing. Also ask your child to provide feedback on repetitions as you go. The goal of repetition is to build knowledge. Keep in mind that, "Practice makes permanent, not perfect." Repetitions done incorrectly or without reaching the desired goal your teacher desires are counterproductive.

h. WHY DO YOU MAKE SUCH A BIG DEAL ABOUT FOOT POSTURE?

The body can either help you or hurt you. Foot posture is crucial to be a good violin/viola player. Often students who have poor tone also have poor foot posture, which can lead to problems in instrument and bow posture as well.

i. HOW SHOULD HOME PRACTICE BE STRUCTURED?

When practicing with your child, start the practice session with what they will succeed easily with and then get to the more challenging piece or aspect they must work on for that week. Starting with a predictable task to warm-up will psychologically relax your child, and will help them feel that they can handle the challenging tasks when confronted with them. Typically, try to structure the practice session with easy tasks first, work on the difficult and then end with an easy task or easy piece. Follow the list (lesson outline) that your teacher has given your child to do. DO NOT DEVIATE.

j. I HAVE AT LEAST TWO CHILDREN STUDYING VIOLIN WITH YOU. CAN THEY PRACTICE TOGETHER?

Siblings should not practice together if they are on the same piece, or even different pieces. (Playing together on occasion is okay, but should not be a daily occurrence.) On daily practice, give them their own space to practice. Take the opportunity to spend some one on one time with each child rather than consolidating your time by practicing all together. Your child will appreciate your effort to have their own individual practice time with you.

k. DO YOU ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN OTHER STRING PROGRAMS, I.E., SCHOOL ORCHESTRA, YOUTH ORCHESTRA, ETC.?

Yes, I highly recommend that students take advantage of whatever additional opportunities they may have to further their musical study. I offer group lessons as a stepping stone to orchestra, because making music with different instruments and making new friends is a great experience. However, I do not recommend participation in an orchestra (school or otherwise) for first-year students of any age or ability. Typically, orchestra is not recommended for violin students until at least Book 4.

l. DO YOU ENCOURAGE STUDYING ANOTHER INSTRUMENT IN ADDITION TO VIOLIN?

For many students, adding a second instrument can be a very positive thing; and at some point, if there is interest from your child in studying an additional instrument, I would encourage it. However, string instruments are the most challenging instruments to learn in comparison to any other instrument. There is nothing wrong with students studying more than one instrument (or expressing interest in studying another instrument in the future), but keep in mind that string study is demanding to be a successful string player. (A colleague of mine advocates that her students wait to learn another instrument until after Book 7. The reason for this is that by that time, students are performing proficiently enough on their

violin that the newness of studying a new instrument will not hamper their concurrent study on violin. Students also have a better appreciation and aptitude for applying themselves to additional music study due to their well-ingrained violin “work ethic”.) That said, I also feel that concurrent study on multiple instruments is very dependent on a variety of factors including your child's age (children under age 10 should probably wait before adding a second instrument); how many other activities they are involved in (Will your child have sufficient time to practice both instruments well?); etc.

m. MY CHILD IS BEING OBSTINATE ABOUT PRACTICING AT HOME. WHAT AM I DOING WRONG?

There are going to be good practices and there are going to be bad practices. If your child is not happy about practicing on a given day, it generally has nothing to do with the instrument. It may be the first thing they have been asked to do for the day that involves “homework.” They may have had a bad day at school. They may be reacting to something you did earlier. Always try to end the practice before it starts to deteriorate.

n. HOW OFTEN SHOULD MY CHILD PRACTICE AT HOME?

Close to daily practice if possible is the best standard for successfully learning an instrument. Each day you skip makes the next time you practice more difficult. Shorter, focused and consistent practices in which goals are well defined yield the best results in terms of practice.

o. WHY IS MY CHILD NOT PERMITTED TO PLAY THEIR NEWEST PIECE AT RECITAL/MASTER CLASS?

High-stress situations for children need to be handled with playing a piece they are confident with playing. It is important to remember that the entire world does not know the order of the pieces. Performances are not the time for your child to demonstrate how far along they are in the books.

p. WHY DO YOU EMPHASIZE DAILY LISTENING OF THE SUZUKI RECORDINGS?

There are a vast number of reasons for listening often. Parents who want to jump start their child's motivation and help their children progress in the easiest and smoothest way possible through the Suzuki repertoire should strive for repeated daily listening of the Suzuki recordings. The Suzuki method is based on the model of language learning. Infants are surrounded always with their native language. Imagine if an infant only heard their native language for 15 minutes a day. Although this seems ridiculous, the same adage applies to neglecting to listen to the Suzuki recordings, or listening to it only once rather than repeatedly. Without this essential component, it is very easy for a student's progress to diminish or stall out. It should come as no surprise that students who are listening consistently (and repeatedly and daily) progress through the repertoire much faster than students who listen sporadically or not at all.

Listening also helps to address the issues of poor intonation and rhythmic inconsistencies without the fuss of dissecting the piece to fix these issues at a lesson. If your student is having difficulty with his/her intonation, you will be amazed at how it will improve if they start to listen more!

q. IF MY CHILD IS NOT FOCUSING DURING THE LESSON, SHOULD I CALL THEM BACK TO ATTENTION?

Please allow your teacher to control the lesson environment, unless the teacher asks for your assistance. Hearing more than one voice in the lesson is confusing to your child. I once attended a master class where the clinician asked a parent if she wanted to teach the lesson instead of the teacher teaching the lesson after the parent kept coaching and scolding her daughter! While the former example is quite blunt, the reality is that the learning process becomes more difficult for your child if they are also trying to figure out who they should be listening to for instruction.

r. I NOTICE THAT THE TEACHER IS NOT ALWAYS CORRECTING ALL MY CHILD'S IMPROPER POSTURE, ETC. IS THE TEACHER AWARE OF THESE ERRORS? SHOULD I HELP CORRECT THEM?

Learning to play the violin is a very intricate and technical process. I often joke with my students that if they had been born with a violin and bow in hand, they would not need lessons! As the teacher, it is my prerogative to help your child establish good posture habits from the beginning. However, once these basic posture habits have been learned (or rather your child knows what good posture entails), I often will focus more on helping a student with whatever improvement they need to produce the best tone possible. For example, if your child's violin elbow is not quite under the instrument as it should be, but it is their bow thumb that is collapsing and causing poor tone, I may ignore the elbow for the present to help your child focus more on correcting their thumb. It is never a case that I do not want to fix *every* little posture boo-boo, but more that I must try and assess what correction will help your child the most for that week. Continue to work on fixing posture issues

at home, and, obviously, if you are noticing that your child is being consistently sloppy about something all the time at home, be sure to let your teacher know.

s. WHAT THINGS SHOULD I BE LOOKING FOR DURING THE LESSON?

As the home teacher, your job is to understand the lesson assignment in 3 ways: 1. How is it to be done; 2. How many times it is to be done with what outcome; and 3. The results to look for that match your teacher's concept of excellence.

t. COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR TEACHER IS IMPERATIVE.

If you feel uncomfortable or troubled by anything that is happening along your Suzuki journey, please take the time to discuss it with the teacher. Often, discussing something when it first starts to bother you will bring a more satisfactory resolution to the problem. It is better to discuss something about your child with the teacher when your child is not present.

u. HOW LONG DO I (THE PARENT) NEED TO ATTEND LESSONS WITH MY CHILD?

Parents should plan to attend their child's lessons until the student is at least 12-years-old (or by Book 4), as there is a natural tendency toward independence at this age, and by Book 4, most students know what good practice entails. However, your teacher will need to approve any change in parental attendance at lessons before permitting the student to attend lessons minus the parent.

v. DO I HAVE TO ATTEND LESSONS WITH MY CHILD?

The Suzuki method is designed to work the best with parental attendance at weekly lessons, and parents practicing with their child at home during the week. However, as a teacher, it is also my pedagogical philosophy that every child should have the opportunity to have music lessons. Parental attendance at Suzuki violin lessons is the IDEAL, and I will advocate heavily for parental involvement in lessons. I know how important parental involvement is to your child's progress. I also realize that it does not necessarily work for every student and parent in every single situation. If you are unable to commit to attend lessons with your child each week, please be candid with your teacher when you begin lessons about why you will be unable to participate in this wonderful process. The studio requirement is that students must be 13-year-old or older to attend lessons without a parent. While it is in your child's best interests to have the parent attending their weekly private lessons and assisting at home with practice, exceptions can be made for you and your child if needed. A penalty fee will be assessed to your account if your child attends lessons without a parent present and taking notes. The reason for this is that students under the age of 13, in particular, who attend lessons minus a parent or minus note-taking, do not progress as much or as quickly as their peers who attend lessons with a note-taking, assisting-with-home-practice parent.

w. PRACTICE GUIDELINES

The following is a suggestion as to the **minimum amount of time** your child should be practicing each day according to their book level:

- Pre-Twinklers & Students on Twinkle Variations—at least 20-30 minutes/day
- Early Book 1—at least 20-60 minutes/day
- Late Book 1—at least 30-80 minutes/day
- Book 2—at least 40-80 minutes/day
- Book 3—at least 60-80 minutes/day
- Books 4-8—at least 1.5 hours-4 hours/day
- Books 9-10 & Beyond—at least 4-6 hours/day