



A Toddler Approach to Practising

BY WENDY HILL

Throughout thirty-plus years of teaching piano students, I have found the issue of practising a constant challenge. Except for a small minority of highly-motivated students, most children and parents struggle to maintain positive, happy and efficient practices.

I have attempted to motivate with creative charts, stickers and whatever tips come to mind but these are usually effective only in the short-term. As a young mother teaching and practising with my own two children, I found the closeness of relationship between parent and child often caused more tension than joy. On many occasions emotional heartstrings tugged to breaking point and even snapped, resulting in arguments and tears.

Now, a generation later, grandmotherhood has given me a new perspective and objectivity about practising as I observe my one year old granddaughter, Abigail, learning to eat, walk and talk. What sheer joy and delight this toddler stage is! Twenty-five years after my own children were toddlers, I remember the hard work of caring for little ones *more* than the countless blessings they brought. This article is intended to encourage parents of young piano students to put the blessings of these early years into perspective with the hard work.

The word *toddle* means ‘to go with short unsteady steps, an unsteady gait.’ As I read new books on childrearing in order to be a supportive grandma, I cannot help but notice the similarities between

the toddler stage and beginning piano students. There is one word which seems to characterise them both—**mess**. Let’s look at messes in practices and toddlerhood and see if we can learn from our attitudes towards both.

BEGINNER MUSIC STUDENTS AND TODDLERS

A beginner student of any musical instrument, whether five years, ten years or older, is really a one to two year old toddler. They have all come out of the ignorant baby stage and are stepping into unknown territory. Toddlers learn about moving in the space around them. Beginner students learn about moving around the more confined space of the keyboard or instrument. The obvious main differences are that the five to ten year old can already walk and talk and has some coordination and social skills.

Parents allow their baby to grow, smile, crawl, walk and talk as they are able. But for some strange reason, these same parents suddenly expect the same slightly older child to learn and progress faster than their ability allows. I am fully aware of my mistakes when I was a young mum and teacher, expecting my two young ones to play the piano beautifully all the

time. Too often I'd rush in and fix the problem and not let the children learn from their mistakes.

A parent should perhaps occasionally be on the hot seat of the piano stool and experience what the student goes through. I have taught several adult students (mums and dads) and they certainly changed their thoughts and expectation of their children and appreciated more the enormous amount of information which the brain has to cope with. Not only have these parents learned the physical challenges of coordinating fingers, feet and eyes, but they also discovered the emotional pressures which can be felt—such as being expected to do their best so as not to disappoint the teacher, or feeling guilty because they know they haven't practised enough or followed instructions correctly, or putting personal expression into playing when they perhaps have been trained to hide their emotions.

Life happens. It often distracts from our focus on the music practice or lesson. Adults have plateaus when things go well and valleys when they don't. Children are no different and have plateaus in their progress. Nevertheless we all still have to keep on persevering through the hills and valleys of life. Recognising a valley and empathising with our children can go a long way. We can know this in our heads but it doesn't always show in practice and this can lead to 'messes'. Now, back to our toddlers!

LEARNING TO EAT

As toddlers learn to eat, walk, talk and use the bathroom by themselves, countless messes and accidents occur. What is our response when we see our precious little ones trying to put food in their mouths only to find it unintentionally squishes out both sides, spreads over the cheeks, even up the nose, runs down the arms to the elbows, all over the highchair and onto the floor? Perhaps you are smiling now. Yes, we smile, laugh and groan inside and even reach for the camera to record this funny historic moment. We know that this is all the toddler is capable of at this stage and we take the time to let them continue making a mess while learning to direct the food into the mouth. We know that the skill of eating with better table manners *will* be mastered in time after this messy stage. We clean up the mess in full expectation of another one in a few hours.

How does this compare with our response to our slightly older child fumbling over the piano keys, unintentionally playing wrong notes with wrong fingers? This is a less obvious invisible mess of soundwaves. It's too easy to stop the child immediately, physically place the correct finger on the right note, look at the clock to see how much longer we have to sit through this and tell them to hurry up. We are not really saving time by over-helping because tomorrow we'll have to go through the same process and it will take the child even longer to learn the right notes and fingers. Are you smiling now?

LEARNING TO WALK

What is our response as our one year old learns to walk? The toddler toddles and waddles. They have short unsteady steps and rock from side to side, risking balance in fear of falling over while desparately holding onto your finger. We respond by helping them balance and being an anchor point till they are ready to let go. We cannot hurry them because we know they *will* walk in their own time as they are able. When they finally let go after falling over many times, we comfort, hug, laugh and use encouraging words with a high-pitched, happy, patient tone of voice—‘Whoopsadaisy! Never mind! Up you get! Come on, you can do it! Kiss it better! You’re OK! Good girl! Well done! Off you go again!’ And before we know it our darling toddler, who couldn’t even crawl just a few months ago, is running.

This is life. We take risks, fearing the next step forward, having disasters and falls, big and small, but we have to get up and keep on going. Over time we look back and see we’ve actually progressed a long way.

Piano playing is just as difficult as learning to walk. The difference is that the child has ten ‘legs.’ Controlling the fingers involves much finer motor skills than moving the legs. As babies develop from being unable to move to finally pressing piano keys, they progress from the larger body movements to the smaller—neck, back, arms, and legs.

piano playing is just as difficult as learning to walk

They move their wrists and fists and eventually can pick things up with the fingers. It will be some time before they can control a pencil. Controlling the fingers on a piano keyboard is as significant as walking and running.

What are common parent responses as the child accidentally plays wrong notes and fingers, trying to keep the back straight and feet still at the same time and also read notes? Often it is the opposite of when the toddler walked—few, if any smiles, hugs, kisses or encouraging words, little or no laughter, many huffs, puffs and sighs, low-pitched grumpy impatient tones of voice with discouraging words—‘Come on! Hurry up, we haven’t got much time! Get it right! Follow the instructions! Do what your teacher says! Third finger, not the fifth! It’s a G—not F!’

Soon, practices become dreaded times and we hear, ‘Go and do your practice,’ not, ‘Come and do your practice.’ And in final desperation the older sibling is brought in to do the practice instead of mum. Progress is definitely hindered by negative reponses and withholding emotional support. Practices are no longer a happy positive experience but a serious tense time. Are you smiling now?

I list these negative responses not to make you feel guilty but to share that I recognise them too because I have been through it all. Time pressure causes us to want things right first time. Quick results are demanded and expected like a click on a mouse. Frustration and argument result when it doesn't happen. But our precious little ones are not computers or robots but human beings.

2 Timothy 2:23–25 warns about arguments and quarrels and how it is more important to be kind and to gently instruct.

Let's return to our happy toddler days again.

LEARNING TO TALK

How does our toddler learn to talk and what is our response? I have the most wonderful, happy 'conversations' with Abi. Not one of them makes sense in English and they are full of goobledygook sounds being practised for the real language—'dadoo', tongue clicking, 'baba', 'pppp' and blowing raspberries.

Using the tongue is an even finer skill than using the hands and feet in eating and walking. It takes longer for intelligent words form. Amazingly, the tones of our language seem to be learned long before the actual words. The gabbled 'sentences' even have full-stops, question marks and exclamation marks. The voice tone conveys specific meanings and emotions without words according to what is heard and absorbed from the environment.

Sometimes Abi's voice can be gentle, cheerful, happy, fearful, angry, very definite or authoritative. Already she gets her meaning and feelings across to the listener.

How do we respond to all this language nonsense? We copy it! There are squeals of delight, much laughter, many smiles, happy, cheerful voices being raised an octave. Joyful, ecstatic and hilarious goobledygook comes out of our mouths. We say things in such a way that we'd never use with another adult. Before Abi was born I said I'd never speak baby-talk to my grandchildren. But that is exactly what I am doing now!

Her language is contagious. We copy Abi. She copies us and the cycle continues. Fortunately, our language is also contagious and eventually she will abandon gibberish and speak English.

Read that last sentence again. Yes, the toddler *will* speak English. We do not have to explain how to put the tongue and lips in certain positions to form words. We simply know and expect that our toddler will speak our language. We cannot force it before the child is ready. *It will* happen.

Now let's translate all this language learning into making beautiful tones on the piano. If a baby has absorbed the intonation of language in the first year of life and can express it in the second, then how easily it will be when they are five years or older to absorb the beautiful, musical sounds from listening to the CD.

These sounds are not just notes but also the sensitive louds, softs, crescendos, decrescendos, phrasing/breathing, hand balance, and singing quality of cantabile playing. These are all extremely fine and difficult skills for a child to master.

How important it is that good quality music (i.e. a balanced blend of melody, harmony, rhythm and dynamics) is played in the baby and toddler years. God designed this super-sensitive hearing for great purposes and I shudder to think of the effects of new little ears being assaulted with poor quality background music. Some examples are the mechanical, relentless, addictive beat in computer games played by older siblings and the scary, sinister, sudden, aggressively loud music as older children and parents watch movies. I also wonder about the lifeless music-box sounds that come from modern babies' toys. Classical pieces are sometimes used but the baby is far better off hearing the original rather than a cheap and nasty version. Music is blasted out in shopping centres and restaurants and is hard to avoid.

The baby or toddler may seem asleep or unresponsive but these sounds, good and poor, are all absorbed and will be reproduced sooner or later in the choice of listening habits and the music played. Parents have much control over what goes into their children's ears and hearts just as they control the food—healthy or junk—which goes into the bodies.

I have side-tracked a little but listening is a very important issue with all ages and especially babies, toddlers and beginner piano students. Now, back to language, tone and words.

The third chapter of James, written 2000 years ago, explains in great detail about taming the tongue. His words still apply today. The tongue is certainly a very small part of the whole body and very difficult to control. Like a small flame, it has the power to cause the great destruction of a bushfire. Piano practices can be a testing time to control the 'flame' or let it rage. We can discover tones of voice we didn't know existed. Verbal abuse can abound with our own child which we'd never use with another adult. Sarcasm breeds cheekiness and the smile or laugh that accompanies it gives permission and makes it acceptable for the child to do exactly what you don't want. It can also reflect insecurity in the parent to assert authority. Anger breeds anger. One of the child's biggest fears is an angry parent. Reality of the parent's voice tone hits hard when the child uses the same tones and words back. I speak from experience.

Practices are good opportunities to practise taming the tongue. Whispering is a good technique to control voice tone when impatience and anger raise their ugly heads. Or try taking a deep breath and count to three before speaking. Raise your eyebrows and smile, then speak normally and lovingly. Say three positive things for each negative. Matthew 15:18

says, ‘things that come out of the mouth come from the heart’. Push aside tiredness and enjoy the chance to sit down and relax with your child.

Enough on tone of sounds, musical and vocal. I think you get the message. Let’s look at toddlers, music students and learning vocabulary in order to communicate intelligently.

Some words take time to master, such as *subdominant*, *second inversion*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Deuteronomy*. These are just as new and learnable as ‘daddy’ and ‘mummy’ are to a one-year old. A toddler *will* learn to say these words in their own time and will practise them over and over by using them constantly and in context. Likewise the piano student needs to learn to pronounce and use music terms in context. Shyness is no excuse. Saying, ‘I can’t’, whingeing, and mumbling are not acceptable. If some words are strange and difficult we just go slower till they are mastered. Then intelligent music conversation can begin.

A BIG PICTURE

We can clearly see now the similarities between a toddler learning to eat, walk and talk and the young beginner student learning fine piano skills. They are both essentially at the same learning stage. So often parents are deeply involved in the messy details of parenting and teaching that it can be hard to see the big picture. An overall goal in practices is to rekindle the flames of toddlerhood, bring back

the joy, delight, happiness, laughter and positivity and see the growth and progress. The same encouraging words for a toddler can be used with the toddler-pianist.

life is a series of messes and cleaning up

Life is full of bumps and scrapes just as practising has many wrong notes and mistakes. Toddlerhood, piano practising, parenting, teaching and life in general are all a series of messes, cleaning up, learning to forgive and being forgiven, and moving on—knowing that there’ll be more messes to come but also realising that progress *will* be made.

The growth that occurs in a toddler in spite of the tumbles and messes in the first one to two years is miraculous and phenomenal. Likewise, the growth in the beginning years of piano playing in spite of imperfection is just as miraculous and phenomenal. Compare your child’s first two years of life with what they can do now. Read the first lesson notes you took a few years ago and compare them with what your child can play now. Progress *will* occur if we let it and not hinder it. Your child *will* learn to play just as they learned to eat, walk and talk.

Playing piano well is not the be-all-end-all. Do we really believe and put into

practice the fact that our child does not have to play piano brilliantly (or even play piano at all) in order to get to heaven? If we are not careful, music can dominate the day. Practices can be a joyful or a dreaded part of the day. Parents have control over that and can set the tone for a good practice. Putting practices into perspective with the whole day's activities and also with an even bigger picture—God's picture—can help set a no-nonsense, efficient but pleasant, enjoyable tone.

What is this big picture? It is simply using the discipline of music practice as a tool for developing character, so God can use the pianist for His higher purposes instead of music being just good for entertainment and self-expression. Let's look closer at character training in toddlers and beginning students.

BEGINNINGS OF CHARACTER TRAINING

The first years of anything new are always the most important. The learner is said to be 'in-training.' Toddlers are 'in-training' to be self controlled, sociable, well mannered and fruitful human beings and eventually parents and teachers. Beginner piano students are 'in-training' to be sensitive and skilled musicians. In our heads we know this to be true but in practice, training is not easy.

What is training? It means 'to give discipline and instruction, drill and practice designed to impart proficiency and efficiency' (Macquarie Dictionary).

Strong's Concordance says, 'to narrow, discipline, train up'. All of these aspects of training involve self control. The natural sinful tendency is to take the wide gate but Jesus said, 'Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it' (Matthew 7:13–14). How often do we see undisciplined children who obviously lack training? We do not want our children not to be like them.

Every daily activity is an opportunity to train a child. Having lunch provides opportunities to set the table, sit and wait patiently for the meal, practise table manners, use social skills in conversation, and clean up afterwards. Toddlers and children are naturally self-centred and often unwilling to obey instructions, lacking that self control which must be trained. Likewise piano practices are another daily opportunity for training self control in many areas—physical coordination, reading skills, respectful parent/child relationship, communicating calmly, focusing, concentration, obedience, attitudes, behaviour and making wise choices.

Where does the model come from? Who does the training? The parent. In piano practices it is usually the mother. Oh dear! I hear groans. What an awesome responsibility God has given us parents. Did we parents receive sufficient discipline

and training in Christ's narrow path so we could become excellent models and trainers? I certainly didn't. Many young mums are thrown in the deep end when they have their first child. Even those who have had training as teachers in a particular field have little (if any) advantage when it comes to training their own children. It takes a great deal of self control on the parent's part in order to teach efficiently. It takes a great deal of self control on the child's part to be trainable.

Prevention is better than cure. The rewards of practising self control in order to prevent unhappy practices are enormous and well worth the effort. These include:

Physical

Playing well, coordination skills, hugs, smiles, loving eye contact

Emotional

- Happy child, happy mum, happy dad
- Feelings of security, love, acceptance, peace, positivity, encouragement and being blessed
- Elimination of emotional outbursts
- Anticipation and looking forward to the next practice and time alone with mum

Intellectual

- New ideas from the lesson are practised, sense of orderliness, efficiency, achievement and progress
- Positive flow-on to other areas of learning

Spiritual

- Motivation to continue, a sense of freedom within boundaries
- Scripture memorisation, playing with heart
- Learning the importance of being still and playing soft, slow pieces as well as loud, fast ones
- Opportunity to practise forgiveness

Is this a dream? Is it possible to have such practices? I believe it is. Perhaps not 100% of the time but I can remember some wonderful times in practices with my children which gave us a buzz and enthusiasm to go on.

The first few practices are the hardest as boundaries are established. The child realises this is serious and learns that the parent is in charge from the start. The first two to four years will seem slower and time-consuming. But this foundational early training will pay off because you and your child will grow together and develop more self control, perseverance, respect for each other and a closer relationship. It is the same with parenting. The early years are the most formative.

One mum wrote:

Doing chores together is actually one of the nicest times of the day for our children. We are working together and they are positively affirmed for their efforts and attitudes.... The repeated explanations and patience required in the initial stages are rewarded many times over'.

Mel Hayde, in 'Terrific Toddlers'

Let's slightly reword this to:

Doing **piano practice** together is actually one of the nicest times of the day for my child. We are working together and they are positively affirmed for their efforts and attitudes... The repeated explanations and patience required in the initial stages are rewarded many times over'.

I do believe this is possible.

PREDICTABILITY IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

Part of the learning process is being able to predict or expect what you want to happen then repeating it many times to gain control. Sir Donald Bradman hit countless cricket balls against a corrugated iron wall. Evonne Goolagong did the same with a tennis ball. The ball could hit the iron anywhere on the curves and bounce off in any direction. These two famous sports people became champions because they could predict where the ball would go and control it.

One day I watched little Abi practise climbing up and down a set of five steps. In her mind she knew what she wanted to do and she expected to achieve it. On each step she practised turning around to me, said a few 'words', smiled, waved goodbye then climbed up the next step to the top. Then, she crawled halfway down the passage, smiled at me and returned to go down the steps. Again she stopped on each step, looked at me, spoke, smiled, waved and climbed down to the next step. This went on for thirty minutes. Up and down

she went. I was fascinated by her persistence, concentration, determination and enjoyment.

For Bradman, Goolagong and Abi, repetition was the means to understanding, not a chore. What they mastered they wanted to do over and over. They gained control of the skill. This is what practice is all about: self control and repetition to achieve what the mind wants and predicts. They did not doubt that they would succeed.

It is precisely the same with piano skills. Students love to do what they can do well. Students want to play well. Likewise, if we predict/expect in our minds to have a good practice it is more likely that the child will play well. If the positive things are focused on and there is self control in both parent and child, the situation comes under control and the goal is achieved. If we don't take control of the situation and expect and fear an unpleasant practice, that will probably happen! Whatever is expected and repeated, good or bad, is what will be practised and become habit. As someone said, 'If you keep on doing what you have been doing, then you will keep on getting what you have been getting.'

THE MUSIC FOR OUR MAKER PIANO COURSE (MM1 AND MM2)

Let's put practices into another big picture of *The Gift of Music* program to give a more realistic perspective.

Practising is not simply a matter of learning pieces. MM1 and 2 are only one-sixth of the whole program. Six parallel music paths are followed throughout the course:

1. 42 piano pieces in Volumes 1 and 2
2. Technique
3. 14 elements of music
4. Reading
5. History from Vol 2 onwards
6. Creativity and composition

These six music paths are linked in practices and involve the basics of everything discussed so far—learning to eat, walk, talk, play piano and train character. Everything is connected. Colossians 1:17 tells us, ‘He is before all things and in Him all things hold together’. So it is with practising. If we believe this and depend on God to keep it all together when feel like we are drowning, we gain a bigger, better picture of learning piano and music in general. Music is primarily a tool to know God more. The side-benefits of music knowledge and character training are enormous.

Our child *can* get to heaven without even playing piano but what is learned in the process is invaluable. If our child is not practising, something less beneficial may easily replace that activity. MM1 and MM2 are designed to be a foundational music program which means they are the beginning ‘toddler-level.’ The foundation is based on the solid Rock of Christ and is a springboard to intermediate and

repetition is not a chore

advanced levels which branch out to include traditional classical works. These two volumes are the most important stage of learning. My piano teacher (now 90 years old) once told me that teachers of beginners have a much harder and more important role than teachers of advanced students because we lay the foundations for all that is to come. How true that is of parenting as well as music teaching. These precious happy toddler years are a joy and blessing which pass too quickly. My goal is to help transfer our attitudes and feelings for a toddler to our slightly older ‘toddler-piano player’.

How I wish this article had been available when I was starting teaching my own children. I write these things to give you a head start. You don’t have to wait until grandmotherhood to learn them. Treasure your practice times together with your child because the years go far too quickly. One day your child will leave home and you won’t hear the piano playing any more.

Your child is a miracle and gift from God and He gives tremendous inborn abilities. We parents and teachers are the trainers. Like a good gardener all we do is water, fertilize, prune and love the plants. God does the growing because He designed us to grow. We can hinder growth by ‘withholding nutrients’ (e.g. not

playing the CD), or neglecting to ‘prune and love’ (e.g. not disciplining or practising, or showing impatience and lack of self control). Alternatively, we can help progress by doing the opposite: playing the CD, disciplining, practising and showing patience and self control.

When (not if) messes occur we adult-children still have a Heavenly Father to turn to. A toddler looks up at us with adoring, beautiful, sparkling, smiling eyes, wanting and expecting our love. An older toddler-piano player looks at us in the same way, desiring and expecting to see love in our eyes. Similarly, we adult-children desire and expect love from our Heavenly Father. Forgiveness can flow from God through us to our child.

My two children developed into beautiful, sensitive musicians and wonderful, loving adults despite all my mistakes, messes and failures as a parent and teacher. If any of this article causes guilt feelings that perhaps you have failed to be a strong supportive anchor in practices, then remember you *can* have

guilt-free times with your child. See the practice as just another mess, clean things up by forgiving your child and asking forgiveness, recover and move on.

We walk beside our children, sometimes picking them up and carrying them through difficult times, occasionally presenting achievable challenges. This is how our ever-patient and ever-loving Lord treats us adults. Standing in front and dragging along is not a beneficial and efficient way of teaching.

If God can be so patient and gracious with us, then we can pass patience and grace on to our child. We pass on the comfort that we received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3–6). God’s love is *agape* and we can pass this unconditional love to our child and experience the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life set me free from the law of the spirit of death.

Romans 8:1–2

Happy Toddling!



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