



The ABC's of Music – a Parent's Guide

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By David McCormick

It's no longer news to most parents that music lessons for kids result in better performance at school. For many years, research across the world has demonstrated a direct link between learning an instrument and an improvement in grades and test scores.

But why? And what can parents do to help music lessons be a source of fun and not frustration?



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It's a question that music teachers hear constantly. Today's parents know all about the benefits of music education. According to the College Entrance Examination Board, students participating in music score 63 points higher on the verbal SAT and 44 points higher on the math SAT. The American Psychological Association reports that six years of music lessons correlate to an average IQ increase of 7.5 points.

And a 10-year study directed by the U.S. Department of Education demonstrated that these results were consistent regardless of students' socioeconomic status, underscoring that the benefits of music lessons aren't just the result of having parents who can afford them.

Happily, music is something that almost every child can feel successful at if parents approach it with the same attitude they'd bring to sports, reading, or any other developmental activity. Here are some tips:

The first thing to understand about music is that it's organized by letter names and counting. This is why it correlates so strongly with math and verbal skills. And if it's taught correctly, it's fundamentally pretty simple. Every melody you've ever heard is based on notes with just seven letter names. And every rhythm that's ever set your foot to tapping is organized around groups of either two beats or three. At its core, that's all there is to it: just seven letters and two basic rhythms.

Let's take a minute for that to sink in. With very few exceptions, almost all Western music is organized around just *seven* letters and just *two* rhythms. And yet too many kids and their parents expect it to be challenging and difficult, something accessible only to a few rare individuals with "talent."

But why? English is built with 26 letters, and we expect kids to be able to recognize those and spell simple words by kindergarten. Math is built with just 10 digits, and we expect kids to have no trouble learning to add and subtract and multiply and divide and eventually find coefficients and derivatives.

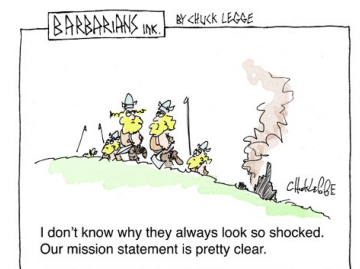
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After 25 years as a music teacher, I've come to believe that the issue is with parents' expectations of music lessons.

Music lessons are typically for a half hour once a week. No parent expected their kids to learn their ABCs in a half hour once a week. Reading was something that was reinforced every day at home. No parent expected their kids to understand and work with numbers in a half hour once a week. This too was something that was reinforced daily at home.

If they are to be successful, music lessons need to be approached the same way. Almost all music teachers encourage parents to sit in on at least the first few lessons in order to understand what their children are being taught, and to understand how to reinforce this at home.

Again, there is nothing more to music than ABCs and counting. After a few weeks, kids will be taught that a C chord is simply three notes: C, E and G. Those notes will be fingered differently on a guitar or a piano or a violin, but the mathematical/linguistic formula will be the same. Similarly, a G chord is also just three notes – G, B and D – regardless of how those notes are fingered on any particular instrument.

Music is little more than spelling, but success involves the same level of parental involvement that's required for kids to spell CAT and DOG and RUN and JUMP. Reinforcement at home is essential.

The counting of rhythms is identical. No parent expects their kids to learn that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that $5 - 2 = 3$ in a single half hour once a week. Reinforcement at home is crucial. Every kid knows how Twinkle Twinkle Little Star is supposed to sound, but what parents need to be practicing at home is this: 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3... 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3...

Every experienced music teacher understands this, and every experienced music teacher will be happy to help you with ideas about how to incorporate this into practice sessions at home.

Just like math and ABCs, all this can, of course, become complicated.

All of the different sounds of different musical styles are based upon the application of different numerical formulas. The reason that blues music sounds bluesy and jazz music sounds jazzy, and country music sounds country is that they are all incorporating different formulas. But just as no kindergarten teacher starts with algebra, every good music teacher starts with the basics that every kid can be successful with.

In summary, talk with your child's music teacher the same way you'd talk with their math and English teacher. Be sure to understand what it is that your child is being asked to learn, and be sure to understand how to reinforce that at home.

Do this, and you and your child are much more likely to enjoy many hours of happy music-making. And perhaps also some better grades in school.

David McCormick is the owner of Alaska School of Music.

www.alaskaschoolofmusic.com