

# Positive and effective practice at home: a parents' guide

Practising – or 'repetition' – is an important part of getting the most out of the Junior Music Course, so it is not surprising that how to support this at home is one of the biggest issues for parents of JMC children.

Ideally, children would practise without needing any prompting – just because they enjoy it – and they would be focused and effective in their practice. In reality, however, the willingness and ability to practise varies greatly from child to child.

The purpose of this guide is to outline the reasons for practice, and to support parents with ideas and suggestions to successfully encourage their child to practise effectively. It is intended that you keep this booklet to hand throughout the course. We hope you will find the information in the following pages useful and that it helps to inspire a happy musical household!



## Why is it important for JMC parents to encourage their children to practice at home?

Not all extra-curricular lessons require further practice besides attending classes once or twice a week. Yamaha, on the other hand, requests that children practise at home in between lessons. The reasons are discussed here.

The main purpose of practising at home is to review those things achieved in the lesson, but most importantly, to remember the feeling of delight in the music experienced in the lesson!

Yamaha Music School aims to enable children to learn to enjoy music in their own way and to foster their creativity so that they can enjoy a life made richer by music. In other words, Yamaha lessons are designed to convey to everyone the great joy of expressing him- or herself with music at the level and manner that suits each individual.

"If that is the goal, why should children practise at home between lessons?"

It is true that children enjoy the music in their one-hour lesson. However, there is only one lesson per week, and children - with their busy lives! - can forget the fun they experienced in the lesson.

**It is our hope that children experience the same enjoyment of music at home as they had in the lesson, so that they can retain and relive their delight in the music between lessons.**

By repeating this, the feeling of joy will be deepened and strengthened in the children's minds. This is key in developing their creativity - and through this their enthusiasm towards music will be enhanced: they might tell you, "I feel like playing this song", "I want to play like this!" or "I made up this piece!".

**Acquiring sufficient skills to express feelings musically through repetition at home.**

Furthermore, practice is needed to acquire the skills for the freedom of musical expression. In order to gain the necessary techniques to fulfil the desire for expression, repeated practice is indispensable.

Being able to express music freely by acquiring sufficient skills will bring children a greater joy of music. This is why Yamaha encourages children to practise at home.



# Tips

**'Short and sweet':** little and often are the keywords for children just starting out, e.g. singing a song in the car or on a walk; playing a piece once through on the way past the keyboard at home. Gentle encouragement rather than strict practising regimes will help your child develop a habit for enjoying regular music practice.

**Positioning the keyboard/CD/DVD:** organise your furniture so that the keyboard or piano is tempting to play, and so that your child has easy access to the CD and DVD. Perhaps leave the DVD in a place where your child will see it and want to put it on.

**A note of caution:** please do not press fingers down or point to every key needed; likewise, please do not teach your child how to play a piece in advance of the class. These things might seem like a boost of confidence for your child in the short-term, but will not help them in the long-term. One more 'don't': by all means, point and sing the pieces that have been played in the lesson, but please do not point to the notes in the book as they are played – this is not how they are learning the music at this point in the course, it results in unmusical playing and if done regularly the child will not benefit from the natural way we learn music.

**Above all:** show an enjoyment of music yourself, and your child will be encouraged! Please see p41 at the back of the workbook 1: 'Dear Parents'.

## Book 1

## Book 2

**Hands together playing** is introduced. Please be aware that not every piece needs to be played with two hands: some children will want to discover for themselves how to play everything with both hands, and some will be more comfortable playing most pieces with separate hands for the moment. The teacher will guide you on which pieces are the most important to aim for hands together playing.

**Tips:** keep up with the pieces yourself, and play duets with your child – one of you plays the right hand, one the left and vice versa. This is really helpful for hands together playing. Playing the left hand while singing the right hand is usually the best way to achieve hands together playing.

Please see p42-43 of workbook 3: 'Dear Parents'. This includes a few practising pointers appropriate at this stage:

**Begin with the pieces that children can play well,** even if they are not being played currently in lessons. This inspires confidence and sure fingers.

**Practise every day even if only for a short time.** Hopefully, the 'happy habit' set in Books 1 and 2 will pay off now as the pieces are likely to need a bit more attention at home.

**Do not compare your child with other children.** Every child is an individual!

**Recognise and acknowledge the efforts made by children.** Be sympathetic to your child's feelings, whether they are feeling discouraged or triumphant. (If a child is feeling frustrated, sometimes just to name the feeling without trying to offer a solution can help your child get over their frustration or find a solution themselves.)

**Enjoy music other than that of the course...** Listen to music from a variety of sources – some children will be able to pick out simple tunes they hear around them, perhaps on the TV or radio – definitely something to be encouraged!

## Book 3

## Book 4

This is the final book of the first course in the Junior Courses pathway.

**If you haven't done so already, step back.** The children are preparing to advance on to the Junior Extension Course, when parents do not attend the lesson, and are expected not to give help at home, other than general support and encouragement.

**Encourage your child to play their favourite pieces from Books 3 and 4:** their 'permanent repertoire' pieces. Apart from having a piece to play to Granny when she visits, this has many musical benefits! In addition, two of these pieces will be chosen to play in the Fundamental Skills Survey presentation to celebrate the end of the book and this first course. Your teacher will give you more information about the requirements at an appropriate stage.

## Is your child reluctant to practise? Q&A session

Most children will have at least one phase of being reluctant to practise at some point in the course. One of the benefits of the group lesson is that it gives each child the space to have their natural ups and downs. However, parents do still sometimes worry that their child seldom practises at home or seems reluctant to play. Is it just a matter of willingness? We hope you will find some useful ideas here: the advice given below is based on case studies.

**My child often gets bored soon after starting to practise.**

Children, especially at JMC age, are not usually able to initiate their own practice sessions, and even when they do begin, it is difficult for them to keep focused in order to achieve a goal. They may begin to practise, but make several stops and starts, and can be generally quite unpredictable. This is normal! So if your child wants to practise only for a short time, please see this positively as a willingness to play, and observe his progress. In doing so, you are letting the seeds of self-motivation or 'intrinsic motivation' start to set.

**My child promises to practice at a certain time, but forgets quite easily when the time actually comes.**

Children aged four may understand the meaning of making a promise, but it is hard for them to remember on their own to carry out what they promised. It usually helps to give reminders of the chosen practice time a little in advance, rather than saying "you promised to practise now". Some children may begin after one prompt, but others won't start immediately, so parents must find the best way to give their prompts depending on the character of their child.

**My child often practises but does not seem to make progress.**

If your child can't make progress, even with frequent visits to the piano, perhaps it is time to review the points of effective practice. Maybe your child just repeats the music without working on the tricky parts. It is much more effective to focus on the difficult spots. Another family might find that the student can play much better at home than when playing in front of others. The cause may be the child's character – perhaps she gets nervous easily. In this case, have her practise her solo first by herself, then ask her to pretend she is playing in a concert. (Perhaps suggest she lines up some teddies!) This kind of practice will help her get used to the atmosphere of a presentation and can gradually - or in some cases, very quickly! - lessen nervousness.



**My child says: "I'm not going to practise because it doesn't help."**

A lack of confidence may come from within, but may also be caused by lack of successful experience. This kind of child will be motivated if they are given even just one chance for achievement and satisfaction, not necessarily related to music. For example, you could try an activity such as cooking with your child and applaud the result, taking care to use language that makes the child's achievement remain her own (e.g. "You did it!", rather than "Good girl!") Descriptive and accurate praise is much more powerful than a general "well done". The accumulation of confidence through experiences such as this may help to improve the situation. Remember to place value on the effort made in the process of doing something, and not just on the result.

At the same time, shyness and a lack of confidence can be seen in a positive light, as such children are often sensitive and have great capacity to care about the feelings of others.

**My child practises, but only plays her pieces through once, and it does not seem to be effective.**

Your child may not fully understand what is required. The teacher will probably have said during the lesson, "can you play like this?", or "try to pay attention here", so parents are requested to remember these comments and/or to help your child recall what the teacher said. It is very unlikely to just have been to get the notes right! Once she remembers, she will be able to practise more effectively.

To help an older (JXC) child practise more effectively, parents who are not in the lesson may need to ask: "What did your teacher say about this piece in the lesson?"

**My child practises seriously, but after a while begins just to have fun and mess around.**

To nurture the ability to think and create is an important part of a child's education, more important than the ability to simply follow given directions. So we recommend that you encourage your child in his creative explorations. However, parents will judge when to intervene with suggestions to go back to their practice, perhaps with hints related to what they are enjoying: "how about playing this part more beautifully?" and so on.



**When I say, "practise now", my child answers back, "I was just going to practise!"**

Children know they have to practise. If they are not happy to do it, they will try to put it off, but feel guilty at the same time. If you remind her at such a moment, your child is likely to lose interest and willingness. You could ask her, "what time will you practise?" If she does not practise at the promised time, you could say "what time did you decide to practise?" or "as it's nearly time for dinner, you had better finish practising before that." It is important that parents always try to be patient about this.

**My child often cries or gets angry and frustrated if she cannot play well when practising.**

This child is angry with herself, as she cannot achieve her goal, nor fulfil her parents' expectations, as she sees it. She obviously has a strong desire to be able to play well, and has given herself a target: this should be recognised positively. But a child with this character may become easily discouraged by not being able to play something well immediately, so parents should be compassionate and relax their child, observing her carefully to make sure she does not become disheartened. Parents could also advise, "everyone will have something they find difficult to work out at first, so let's improve it step by step".



## Do the words you use inspire your child? Using the right language to stimulate children's enthusiasm.

Children's willingness to practise depends largely on the way their parents support them. This page discusses positive and less positive language parents sometimes use when encouraging children to practise.

### "Why don't you practise now?"

As discussed earlier, children are aware they have to practise. So if parents urge them in this way, they are likely to lose the inclination to play. Parents are recommended to be positive and to encourage their child to make up their own practising plan.

Try: "What time will you practise?" Or: "Will you finish your practising before dinner?"

### "You said you would practise! Why can't you keep your promise?"

This rhetorical question ('why didn't you keep your promise?') sends a negative message: 'you are not a good person'. Although this kind of message does not work, it is one parents very often use. Children will have a reason for not keeping their promise, so it is important to ask what this is. Parents are requested to be constructive, and together with their child, work out how to practise regularly, instead of scolding.

Try: "You made a promise - I wonder why you didn't keep it?"  
"You can keep your promise from tomorrow, OK?"

### "You'll be in trouble with your teacher if you don't practise." "You'll be embarrassed if you can't play well."

It is more likely to be the parents that will feel embarrassed if their child doesn't practise rather than the other way around! Children may neither feel uncomfortable nor get into trouble with the teacher if they don't practise, so approaching the matter in this way is not likely to be effective. Positive encouragement is the best way of motivating your child.

Try: "You'll feel good if you can play this well." Or: "If you practise you'll be able to play better and enjoy the lesson/your music even more."



**“If you don’t like practising, you can give up. These music lessons cost money!”**

For anyone, children or adults, spending money on learning something is not always rewarded directly. It is better to think of what the accumulation of musical experience brings, such as a sensitivity to the joy of music, or an expressive ability responding to beautiful melodies and so on. Parents can share the joy of music and may be able to lessen their own anxiety.

**Try: “If you keep practising, you’ll be able to play better.”**

**“If you don’t play well, your friends will be annoyed.”**

Parents may worry that their child disrupts the class when they don’t practise. This type of approach can put pressure on your child that causes him to try too hard, but then fail to change. It is best not to compare your child with others, but rather to focus on the pleasure of playing better when more practising is done.

**Try: “You’ll feel great if you practise this well: you’ll be able to play it together with your friends.”**

### **Are rewards a good idea?**

Some people think that giving rewards for practice is not a good way to encourage a natural desire to make music. But if used thoughtfully, rewards can work positively in building good practising habits, which in turn lead to a higher skill level and thus an intrinsic motivation to play. A note of caution here: if children get used to them, rewards can lessen motivation and the positive will to learn. Parents should watch carefully to see if giving rewards helps to motivate their child or not.

## Three things to do before talking to your child

Talking to children to motivate them to practise is certainly effective, but there are other things to consider to facilitate better communication.

Firstly, a **close relationship** in your daily life is important – if you usually get upset with your child’s attitude or behaviour, he may not be motivated by your sudden change of vocabulary to encourage him. Sharing the simple joys of daily life will help with efficient encouragement.



Secondly, whether you yourself enjoy music or not, unless you take **pleasure in music**, your words cannot convey to your child the significance of practice that will connect to a greater joy of music, or a belief in the value of music. It is recommended that you take the time to listen to music together, to play together, or even to take up an instrument.

The third point is the parents’ role as **supporter**: attending to whether your child practises properly and in a focused way without getting bored. In other words, parents act as a guide for children, so that they can enjoy practising voluntarily.

We hope that the discussion above will support parents in choosing the right words to motivate their child effectively.

## Practical practising advice

So far, we have discussed the way to stimulate children's willingness to practise at home. In addition, here is some practical advice for parents related to practice methods and a suitable environment that will help to make your child's practice

### Make a weekly schedule together with your child to make practice a habit.

Practising according to a weekly plan that you have decided together is recommended, rather than just to try to practice every day. In addition, if the teacher gives as homework e.g. to play a piece with both hands for the next lesson, children could try just the first two bars on the first day, then on the second day play the left hand while singing the right, and so on, thus making progress day by day until finally achieving hands-together playing. This way, children can practise regularly without feeling daunted, while parents can be supportive of the child's practice day by day. This is also an effective method to try with JXC students who have not yet acquired a habit of practising at home.



### Home practice during JMC emphasises review, while preview is more important in JXC.

In JMC, practice at home is in principle to review and repeat what was experienced in the lesson. Children enjoy repeating what they can do and what they experienced during the lesson: joy is always a great motivator for children to continue studying.

Some parents are not confident that their child will be able to follow the progress of the class and teach their child pieces before they are taught in class. Please be reassured that children are not expected to be note-perfect when they are trying something for the first time in the lesson. By helping your child do this in the short-term, you will be compromising their long-term progress, as your child will have missed out on the stages of learning that the rest of the class are experiencing. So parents are asked to enjoy observing how their child can follow the teacher's direction when doing new things in class.

JXC, however, gradually introduces preview, or learning elements in advance. Preview does not necessarily mean that the children should learn new things by themselves at home, but rather, **to try to apply elements that have been learned already**. (E.g. putting a piece hands together, making up a variation in a way previously studied in class.) By doing so, the abilities that children have acquired so far are employed, and children can be satisfied with their achievement.





**Where the instrument is located in the house is the most significant factor for voluntary practice.**

Each home has a different layout, of course, but it is better to put the instrument where the parents can see the child practise, especially for young children. It is best that parents stay with their child when he is practising, but it may not always be practical to do this. So it helps to put the instrument somewhere where parents can hear the sound or see the child practising, allowing a sense of trust with each other. The instrument may be in a room also used for watching television. In this case, please ask family members to allow the child to concentrate on their playing during practice time.

As the children advance to JXC, they may prefer to practise in their own room by themselves, or to practise using headphones, as they can concentrate better. Even so, parents are recommended to pay attention and keep interested in their child's practice at home.



**Choosing the right instrument in order to stimulate child's positive mind.**

Parents often ask what is the most appropriate instrument for practice. Ideally, it is better to choose a solid and stable instrument, like a piano or fixed keyboard. Some parents think it enough to start with a small instrument such as a portable keyboard, and this is understandable at the beginning of the course when you are gauging the interest of your child. However, you may find that a small unstable instrument with low sound quality may not motivate your child sufficiently. We have seen many cases where children begin practising with much more enthusiasm once she has been given a new instrument.

**Comfortable volume enables effective practice.**

Too loud, and the noise could be disturbing; too soft, and the practice may not be effective – if the volume is too loud or too soft, your child will not be able to listen carefully to what they are playing. Parents are requested to consider a suitable volume so that they can hear the sound from e.g. the kitchen, but at the same time making sure it is comfortable for the child himself. Some JXC parents are not aware of how their child practises, as he puts on headphones. This is because the child does not want the parents to hear him play before he's accomplished something. Some parents try to take off the headphones, but it is better to think of this in a positive light: your child is practising willingly. In this case, please talk to your child and ask him to play for you once he becomes satisfied with something he is playing.

**Make the instrument always ready for practising, but have children play with a clear mind: "now I'm going to practise".**

Children may have the inclination to practise, but if they have to clear things away from the top of the instrument before they can start, this can understandably put them off. It is recommended to make the instrument always ready for practising at any time. To this end, you might decide to leave the lid of the piano open, but bear the following in mind: if the child needs to open the lid to begin practising, and close it to finish, this can encourage a more focused mindset for practice. Of course, if the child is able to make the mental gear-shift that is necessary, the instrument can be left open.

## Moving from enthusiasm to musical independence

by Seiko Yamamoto

### Feeling the joy of music is the basis for musical independence.

One of the objectives of Yamaha Music School lessons is to 'develop children to be able to play the pieces they want to play', in other words, to develop musical independence. Children experience varied musical activities during the lessons that will develop their independence step by step.

The first step is to help children know that 'music is fun!' This feeling stimulates their enthusiasm to play the pieces they enjoy. The sheer joy of music is conveyed during the lesson, and the parents' cooperation in this respect is indispensable. You are asked to take every opportunity, in the lesson and at home, to share the joy of music with your child.

### Listening and singing are important processes towards the joy of playing.

Once children realise the joy of music, their interest in specific pieces is fostered. However, their skills are not yet sufficient to play them straightaway, so they listen to and sing the piece first in preparation for a smooth transition to playing. By listening and singing the piece with pleasure, they can start playing it naturally with pleasure. At the same time, in order to enjoy playing their favourite piece, skills have to be developed accordingly, and for this purpose, children are recommended to take as many chances as possible to have contact with the keyboard. Practice at home is one of the best ways to do this.

### What children have acquired in JMC and JXC brings them to musical independence.

During JMC, children acquire the joy of music. As they advance to the extension course, JXC, they become able to play the keyboard better,

and their positive will to play ('I want to play this piece', 'I want to play the piece like this') and their positive attitude towards practising become gradually apparent - especially at the stage when a choice of repertoire pieces are offered halfway through JXC. Children are motivated by a variety of reasons: e.g. the CD recording, their friends' performances, making up their own music, thus, their strong desire for playing becomes apparent. Their sense of feeling the attractive elements in the piece, their ability to play, their positive mind for progress, as well as the will to practise to improve are combined as great motivation for further practice.

What has been acquired in JMC and JXC brings children towards musical independence in this period. Students are thus prepared for the individual lesson component of the Junior Advanced Course (JAC).



# Parents' expectation vs. children's willingness

by Kyoto Iwadate

## Parents are recommended to modify their expectation according to their child's personality and the speed of learning.

It is quite natural that parents should expect great things of their child. However, these initial expectations may continue, while in many cases their child may not meet with these as they grow. It is vital, therefore, that parents modify their expectations according to their child's development.

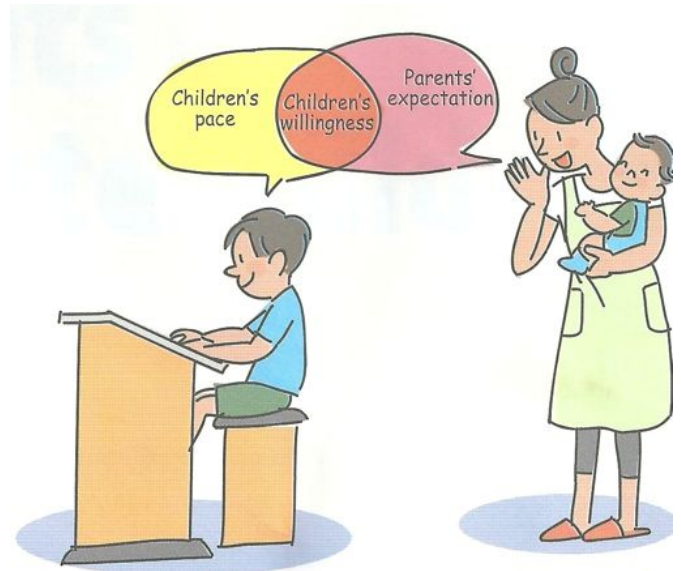
Most parents hope their child will be able to keep up with the curriculum and maintain their initial progress, but if the case arises when they realise their child cannot do this, they may be upset and this can be a heavy burden for the child. In such cases, parents must understand and create an alternative standard of expectation according to the child's development. If it is difficult to achieve the new standard, then they should accept this and consider another goal, **thus it is you, parents, who must adjust to meet the reality of your child.**

It is better to decide instead to hope for the best of your child's ability and individuality: it is a less stressful route, and your child will be encouraged by your closeness.

## Desire for playing and satisfaction from achievement are significant motivation.

As you modify your expectations, you are requested to observe carefully whether your child enjoys whatever activity she does. **The very basis of child education is the enjoyment of an activity.**

As children grow older, the matter will not be so simple. In the latter infancy, or pre-school ages\*, children are not as simply satisfied as their parents may think. They become more aggressive and feel like playing well enough, or in other words, gain pride in themselves and



satisfaction from achievement. In order to help them develop further, parents' assistance is very much appreciated, while teachers and the curriculum play the significant role. For example, you might help your child to play a piece that is still too difficult for her to play alone by playing it as a duet with her; when your child has the challenge of playing a difficult piece, you can make the CD ready to listen to; and parents can give great applause when your child has become able to play such difficult pieces. **The satisfaction from achieving their challenge greatly motivates them for further progress.** At the same time, parents' sincere applause conveys the message that in order to obtain great satisfaction, practice is indispensable. I think this is one of the most important roles that parents can play.

\*In Japan and many other countries, children enter compulsory education aged 6 or 7 years, so 'pre-school' means 4 -5 years old in this context.



Practising handbook prepared by Antonia King/Matrix for Yamaha UK, including articles from an issue of 'Ontsu' by Seiko Yamamoto and Professor Kyoto Iwadate. Prof Iwadate has been studying the development of morality and compassion in pre-school and school-age children, and the development of parents as they raise their children. Seiko Yamamoto and Antonia King are Yamaha teachers.