



Episode 39: An Interview with Crystal Boyack

Christine Goodner ([00:03](#)):

Welcome everyone. I'm excited today to be talking to Crystal Boyack and Crystal, I'm hoping we can start today by you telling people a bit about who you are and what you do in the world of music.

Crystal Boyack ([00:14](#)):

Absolutely. Thank you Christine for having me. I love your podcast. I'm glad you're back. I'm glad you chose to add this to your life with everything in recovery. Um, I'm Crystal Boyack. I am a Suzuki teacher and a Suzuki mom of four and I'm the author of Wee Violin.

Christine Goodner ([00:30](#)):

We will talk more about Wee Violin for sure during our conversation today, but I wondered if first we could zoom back in time a little bit and if you could share a bit about when you first started learning music. I'd love to hear what instrument you started with and how old you were, anything like that that you could share.

Crystal Boyack ([00:47](#)):

<laugh>. That's a great question. So I was trying to remember as I was preparing for this podcast, did my parents require me to play or did I just think they required me to play because all of my older siblings did? I'm the youngest of six, so um, I don't know which one it was, but when middle school came around, I either was expected or thought I was expected to join either band or orchestra. And I'm the youngest of six. All my siblings chose a band instrument and I chose to be rebellious and pick the violin. That was my teenage rebel years is was me picking the violin. So I started sixth grade in the public school system.

Christine Goodner ([01:24](#)):

Oh, that's great. Thank you so much for sharing that. I think it's helpful to hear that not everyone started as a preschooler and I think we can sometimes feel like we're late and putting that in quotation marks, but, it can feel that way if we see other people who started young and it's really important to know that we could start at all different ages.

Crystal Boyack ([01:42](#)):

We can start at all different ages and I remember telling someone once, like, I feel like I'm so behind. This was in college and they're just like, Crystal, you play in the orchestra with everyone who started when they were three. Like how do you feel you're behind? You are playing the same piece as they are. You're doing the same competitions they are. And it took me that many years to be like, oh, I'm not behind. Like, uh, it's fine. There's advantages and disadvantages of both ages, which we could talk about, but it took me years to get over that and stop feeling behind.

Christine Goodner ([02:10](#)):

What do you remember about practicing? Do you remember liking it? Do you remember finding it challenging?

Crystal Boyack ([02:16](#)):

Yeah, you know, that's a great skill. One thing I love about your work, Christine, is you talk about how the skill to practice and the skill to play the violin are two separate skills, right? And so like in my studio, we're working on both those skills simultaneously, but because I started when I was older, I had already learned the skill to practice, right? And so I learned to work, we had chores. So truly it was just learning the violin that I was working on. So I don't remember practice ever being a challenge. I liked the violin, I wanted to play the violin. And so like my mom would have to ground me from practicing to do other things because I just wanted to play practicing. So that's, that's the advantage of starting older is you already have some of the the skills to practice and you're not trying to learn both skills simultaneously. But yeah, I always enjoyed practicing. It was always a joy for me.

Christine Goodner ([03:08](#)):

Hmm, that's a really good point. That's a interesting perspective also. If you are a family with a young beginner who is listening to this, that also doesn't mean it's bad to have started young. It sounds wonderful not to have to learn how to practice, but then when you start young, you don't remember life without music in it and it really becomes part of who you are. You know, I don't remember life without the violin in it. So whatever side of this or age group of this you are coming from, there are advantages and also some things where the other group might think like, oh wow, that sounds nice. So I just wanna say, it's great to start at any age. You are not in the wrong place. And I hope you hear that if you're listening today.

Crystal Boyack ([03:48](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And I will say those who are starting: your ear is gonna be better trained and your body's gonna be more organic and natural because you started when your body and your brain was young. So pros and cons to both.

Christine Goodner ([04:01](#)):

Exactly. Do you remember in your school experience, did you have a group practice experience in the school at all? How did that work? Because I've heard some people say when they started in a school program, there was a group or peer practice component that really helped to motivate them.

Crystal Boyack ([04:17](#)):

Oh, exactly. You know, and and having all of your friends practicing, um, practice wasn't a big deal because that's what you all did and that's where your social group was. And you also were wanting to be the best. I, maybe that was just me, I wanted to be the best that I saw everyone around me. So I would

practice more because I saw how much they were improving and I'm like, oh, I gotta keep up with them and I gotta be better than them. So yeah, the social aspect, I mean I tell my students groups are mandatory. I, it's not optional because you progress so much more and have such a more meaningful and joyful experience when you're doing it as a group.

Christine Goodner ([04:55](#)):

I think there's really something to be said for not just practicing alone in our room or alone with our parent when we're younger. There's sort of this positive peer pressure, like you were saying, to either be the best or improve or keep up with everyone or learn the music together. Especially as our children get older and more social can be a really, really important component. So a good argument for attending group classes, finding a youth orchestra, making sure your child has a social outlet for music. I think it also takes some of the pressure off of us as the practice parent or the family of the student that all the motivation or all of the impetus of practice is coming just from us.

Crystal Boyack ([05:32](#)):

Yes, exactly everything you said. Amen.

Christine Goodner ([05:35](#)):

Do you remember the point when you decided you wanted to become a professional musician or even study music in college?

Crystal Boyack ([05:41](#)):

You know, that's a good question. So professional musician, I think, you know, there were times I wanted to be a professional musician, but it was equal to like wanting to be the president of the United States and wanting to be an astronaut. But there was a moment when I decided to be a professional teacher and that was when I was 15. We moved to a very rural town and there wasn't an orchestra. And so I went to the superintendent and I'm like, you know, there really should be an orchestra in this town. And he's like, oh, people wouldn't be interested, they're only interested in football. And I'm like, well, I'm gonna prove you wrong. So I arranged with the band teacher to use his room and I put an ad in the paper that said, anyone who wants to learn violin come this day, this time.

Crystal Boyack ([06:24](#)):

And I had 60 people show up to learn the violin. So here I was 15 years old, knew nothing, all these people wanted to learn viol violin. And through the help of some incredible mentors and extremely patient families, I started an afterschool program with these 60 families. And it was that experience of teaching, you know, my first time standing in front of them and teaching, um, I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing and doing what I was created to do. And it was that moment that I'm like, yes, I am a music teacher and I've always taught music since then.

Speaker 3 ([07:02](#)):

Wow. I love that story. That's amazing. And I love the just watch me kind of attitude. I feel like it's my personality too. I love that.

Crystal Boyack ([07:10](#)):

Well and that was, I don't know, almost 20 years ago now. And now there's orchestra in the school, in that school district and there's an afterschool program and a community orchestra as well. So now it's a flourishing strings community because I wouldn't take no for an answer

Christine Goodner ([07:28](#)):

What a big impact that's going to have on so many people. It's a great reminder to advocate for music in our communities and not give up if someone rushes us aside or thinks no one will be interested. Music is so important.

Crystal Boyack ([07:42](#)):

You know, I had one student in that program who after a few months of playing, his mom just came to me in tears and said, I have found my son. He's always looked at his older siblings who were the football stars. And he knew he never wanted to play football. I knew he was never gonna play football, but I didn't know what he would do if he didn't play football. And he just loves the violin. I have found my son and he has found himself. Thank you so much.

Christine Goodner ([08:11](#)):

Is there anything else you can remember about growing up learning music that you'd like to share before we move on?

Crystal Boyack ([08:17](#)):

I remember my parents specifically, my dad loved to hear me play. And you talk about this in your book, Christine, and when you said it in your book, I realized how much that's been for my family. My dad. I mean, both my parents never missed a concert. They always sat and listened to me play. Every time I played. My dad would just be like, oh, I love hearing you play. Thank you for playing. And that really made a difference to me for them to love it.

Christine Goodner ([08:46](#)):

What a great way to encourage our children. You know, sometimes parents or families will ask how they can give true praise that isn't just, oh, that sounded great when it didn't really sound perfect. And I think this is how, and in my book, I believe it was Anne Montzka Smelser, who I quoted, who was sharing about Olympic athletes that, she had heard who were saying the best thing their parents could do who encouraged them, was to say, I love to see you play. And of course that applies to sports and music like you're sharing. And it's so powerful and a great way to cheer our children on. Well, switching gears a little bit, I was telling you before we recorded today that I really love your story about your early experience as a practice mom and how it made you switch gears and in a way, as you work with beginners. I'm hoping you could share that story with us today.

Crystal Boyack ([09:36](#)):

Oh, sure, sure. So I, um, had been teaching . . . by the time, you know, I had kids, I'd been teaching for a long time and I had taken, you know, hundreds of kids from their first lesson to twinkle. And so when my kid turned three, my firstborn turned three, I'm like, I'm gonna teach her violin. I'd done it hundreds of times before and I would tell her to make a bow hold and she would just say no to me, <laugh>, like just, no, that's never happened to me before. Or I would tell her to play Takaka stop, stop. And she would just fall on the floor in tears. Now I realize now that this is common for parents, thanks to your work

and, and meeting other parents by the time I'm like, what is happening? When I as a teacher, I tell a student to do something and they do it and I'm telling my daughter to do it and she's not doing it.

Crystal Boyack ([10:21](#)):

And practice was just constantly a fight. And this tension in the practice room went throughout everything in our relationship. And suddenly it wasn't just practice that was tight, but our relationship was tight. And I wondered, why am I doing this? Why am I like, is this worth it? Our relationship is being ruined right now. And one day I was in the kitchen and I was singing and dancing to some music and she came in and started singing and dancing to some music as well with me. And through that singing and dancing and just having a great time, I like sat back and I realized we had this connection between the music and we hadn't had a connection in months since we started violin practice. And through that connection there was beauty in our home and there was healing in our relationship and that beauty and that connection and that healing.

Crystal Boyack ([11:13](#)):

I realize now as I've taken a step back, that's why we're musicians, right? You ask a musician, why are you a musician? It's, they're creating beauty in the world. They're creating connections to communities, to events. And there's healing in that connection, right? There is healing in music. And we as a society desperately need that joy and that healing and that connection and that beauty that music brings. And so I went back into the practice room. I'm like, okay, I know as soon as she gets into book one, she's gonna be fine because she's gonna love the music and she wants to practice the music and she loves music. So I need to figure out a way to get from where we're at now of being barely holding the violin to book one. And I need to do it with real music. So at the time I was using the monkey song, which Rachel was not into, and the Flower song and Seagull Seagull - which I love those songs and they have served our community for so many years and I'm so thankful to Marilyn o' Boyle, who was my husband's teacher actually for giving us that gift.

Crystal Boyack ([12:16](#)):

But they, they didn't have harmonies, they didn't have melodies, um, that were singable. They didn't exist outside this Suzuki bubble and they didn't. And because of all that, they didn't really have the power of connection and the power of motivation that, you know, quote unquote real music brings. So I decided to throw that repertoire out with gratitude for what it has done for me so far. And I started bringing in music that had intricate harmonies, singable melodies that existed throughout the world, that existed throughout time that kids naturally use and play that, that parents were passing down orally to their children. 'cause I knew if they had those qualities, my daughter would love them and she would practice 'em. So I found a bunch of music that we could use in this time and then start organizing that music into, okay, what techniques does she need to learn? How can this music teach those techniques and start pairing a technique to a piece? And out came Wee Violin. So Wee Violin is a collection of 33 songs from throughout the world that teach all the skills you need to get from that first lesson two twinkle with real music from throughout the world.

Christine Goodner ([13:27](#)):

I love you sharing that story because I can really relate to that with my own early experience practicing with my children. And people weren't talking back then as much about their struggles, especially teachers and their own children. And it felt shameful in a way. I, I wondered if my daughter was going to be interested in music, if this was something that was actually for her, what I was doing wrong. So I love

that you took that experience and used it as an opportunity to create something different and to help get students through that first stage of learning an instrument. Because I have an early childhood background, I like how it's developmentally set up to match how young children learn, how they tend to move. And it's really based on the fact that young children do learn differently. Could you talk a little bit more about that with us?

Crystal Boyack ([14:17](#)):

Oh, absolutely. I mean, where do I start? So, um, I have a history in early childhood as well. I fire robin early childhood in college and then Suzuki early childhood. And then I became, I went on a maternity leave from teaching Suzuki early childhood and took my kids to a music together class and now I teach music together. But I mean, all the early childhood curriculums are so great at making music as a family and through making music developing basic rhythm and basic tonal competence. And I realized a lot of kids came into the studio without being able to sing in tune without being able to move in time. And when they can't sing in tune and they can't move in time, they are kind of damned in their instrument progression until they learn those skills. And some kids had those skills and they would just fly on the violin and some kids took years.

Crystal Boyack ([15:10](#)):

And so when I realized, okay, I need to, as a violin teacher develop their pitch and their rhythm while we're developing their violin, I allowed myself and gave myself permission to start doing a lot of activities away from the violin to sing and to move and to get the body ready to play the violin. And what I found is they learn the violin faster, um, and quicker. And so in the wee violin book, I divide the rhythm competence and the pitch competence in the book and then make techniques that you can learn away from the instrument by singing and moving. And then it just naturally goes to the instruments such as popping or marching or stomping or jumping, all these things. But using them intentionally to build the technique on the instrument through music kids love, they are going to then transfer it to the violin with music they love and then learn the violin faster and easier than if we're just teaching violin. . So when I'm teaching young students, it's sometimes hard to figure out how do I fill up a full lesson with them with the focus they have or their physical stamina even to have the instrument in their hands. And what I would say is even if someone is a teacher who's listening and is really married to the music they're using, say the flower song or something else, your training's really great because it's helps us think about what else can I incorporate? Um, like you were just talking about, I think that really helps give a holistic approach. And I agree with you. I have students who come to me with those skills maybe from an early childhood class and then students who have had no background in music yet and it's night and day how ready, which I'll put in quotes, they are to jump right in to making music on their instruments and you know, understanding things like pitch and beat and even how to interact with me as their teacher. And I think an approach like yours is really great for helping every student get that base level, um, of, of understanding. So some students will come to us having early childhood music and some won't for many different reasons. And this really helps us bridge the gap. I love that.

Crystal Boyack ([17:24](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I had someone who recently took a course say like, I took my book one unit training and I was given like five activities to do in PreTwinkle and then I get a three-year-old and I can't do those five activities anymore, <laugh>. So now I have 33 songs and hundreds of activities. Like now I have no problem filling the lesson time because we have to develop so many themes in so many different ways that it's no big deal now.

Christine Goodner ([17:50](#)):

We've talked about this a little bit, but what, what are you hoping people really take away with them from using your method when they're working with their students or their own children?

Crystal Boyack ([17:59](#)):

That's a great question. You know, in the introduction to my book I write that if you wanna climb a mountain, there's a lot of different ways to get to the top of the mountain, right? And all of them are fine ways, but no matter what way you hike, I hope it's a joyful hike for you. Likewise, there's a lot of ways to get a student to play twinkle, but whatever way it is, I think it should be filled with music and I think it should be filled with joy, right? So whatever method you're using, I hope that your violin lessons are musical one and two, that they're joyful. And so often we come to the violin and we're like, oh we have to teach the violin and they don't know how to play yet so we're just gonna drill bow holds and drill violin seats and there's no music actually in the lesson, right lesson. And it creates this spiral, downward spiral of no joy in the lesson. So whatever way you use, whether you use my method or someone else's method, I hope that it's joyful and I hope that it's musical.

Christine Goodner ([18:59](#)):

And there is a lot of questions like when do we get to play real music and it can feel to families like what are we doing right now? and we know as teachers of course we're breaking down all these beginning steps into something real, uh, that's going to add up to their first piece of music, but it can feel very mysterious what's going on to families. And I love incorporating music and singing and fine and gross motor skill development. So it's clear we are developing lots of skills here and there is a way for people to see that tangibly,

Crystal Boyack ([19:32](#)):

Right? You know, and I think it's interesting as you know, Suzuki teacher specifically, we give our parents book one and we have them listen to book one CD that starts with Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. So what they have physically is Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and then they come to lessons and we're moving and we're singing and we're doing bow holds and it's easy for the parent to not be on board. You know, that's one of the biggest complaints I hear from teachers is the parents are on board. It's like, well of course they're not on board. You gave them twinkle and now you're doing this. Like they're just confused. It's not that they're not on board, they're confused. So now, you know, in the We Violin book, the first thing they open to is how to stand and the first song is a how to stand song. And so since you know, giving parents this, I've never had parents say, so when are we gonna start twinkles? So when are we gonna start real music? They see step by step, oh there's a lot they have to learn in order to play twinkle. So now my parents are 100% on board as well as the kids being engaged and getting the technique that I want.

Christine Goodner ([20:35](#)):

That's definitely great. I wonder if we could just zoom back a bit and pivot back to your experience as a practice parent, especially now that you have this new approach as a teacher. What have you learned about being the parent of a musician?

Crystal Boyack ([20:52](#)):

It's hard. It's hard. You know, the reason I wanted to give them a violin is 'cause I am the daughter and granddaughter and great-great granddaughter of dairy farmers, right? So all of my previous generations

were given a cow at a young age and they had to go milk the cow at 5:00 AM every morning. And if they didn't milk the cow, there was gonna be problems. The cow is going to be sick and they weren't going have milk to drink. And, and so I'm like, okay, I live in the city but I'm gonna give my kids a violin instead of a cow. And that's how they're going to learn hard work. But guess what, if you don't milk a cow, the cow's gonna die. If you don't play your violin, nothing's gonna happen <laugh>, right? If you don't brush your teeth, you'll get cavities. If you don't play your violin, nothing's gonna happen.

Crystal Boyack ([21:39](#)):

And at this time it was COVID, so we didn't have a group class to like, you have to keep up with the group class that we talked about earlier. And I was their teacher. So it wasn't like they were going somewhere where they would let down their teacher. No, they didn't care about letting their mom down. As depressing as that sounds <laugh>. So it's just hard because it's a hard thing to learn and there's um, not always a community around you that builds it as an expectation of childhood. A lot of it is letting go of my ego. You know, you mentioned before how we don't talk about it being hard, especially as teachers and for so many years I'm like, oh, their, their thumb is crooked. If I mention to someone their thumb is crooked, then they're gonna think I'm a bad teacher. Or if I tell them that me and my, I mean this was this morning Christine, me and my nine-year-old were having a power struggle over practice and she kept saying, no, I'm not doing it.

Crystal Boyack ([22:35](#)):

And laying on the floor having a fit, they're gonna think I'm a bad parent. Right. So you mentioned earlier the shame of like keep it to myself, hide, hide, don't talk to anyone. And we all know that hiding just breeds shame. And so being open and being vulnerable to discuss these issues and letting my ego go that this does not speak to who I am as a teacher. This does not speak to who I am as a parent. I am trying, I don't care about holding up this pristine building of what I think I am. What I care about is growing and being the best teacher I can for my students and the best parent I can for my kids. And that requires me seeking help and admitting there's a problem and seeking help to find that problem. Ego aside.

Christine Goodner ([23:24](#)):

So true. And it's just so different to work with students. I still feel like it reflects on me sometimes if my students are playing in front of someone else when there's a technical issue. That's not the way I want. But it's so much more that way with our own children and I think it can be really healthy to have a, a place in our lives where we really see them as this is someone else who's separate from me and they're the one that has to decide to put in the hard work and to show up and focus today. And I am just here to support them along the way.

Crystal Boyack ([23:58](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yep.

Christine Goodner ([24:01](#)):

Thank you so much for sharing that. I think the more we normalize the fact that this is hard and you know, if our child's young, there might be days where they are just on the floor not having it. And all we can really do is just think about, okay, how do I show up right now for this child to support them? and I love that you want violin or music to be something that helps teach your child hard work. I think that's really important and a lot of people share that, that interest in developing that with their children. And

that sounds like a great quality. It sounds wonderful on paper that we're gonna develop this through music, but it's not always pretty to learn that lesson. Sometimes we learn it because we have to slog through and push through the days We don't feel like doing something and it can be hard to learn that lesson. So if teachers are interested in connecting with you and finding out more about Wee Violin and how they can use that in their teaching, what's the best way for them to do that?

Crystal Boyack ([24:58](#)):

So glad you asked. So you can go to my website, crystal Boak, B-O-Y-A-C-K music studio.com and you can purchase my book there. It's also on Amazon. Um, and I also have an online course for teachers. You can find out on my website, there's a free masterclass you can sign up for on my website and see how some of this works in action of using real music movement, um, and developmentally appropriate techniques to teach these young beginners what that looks like in action. So there's a free masterclass on my website as well. I'm also on Instagram Crystal Boy music studio.

Christine Goodner ([25:32](#)):

So for the parent or family who might be listening and maybe their teacher doesn't use this method, so what they're doing with the actual instrument in their hand might look different. What are some ways they can incorporate what you're talking about into their home music practice?

Crystal Boyack ([25:47](#)):

That's such a great question. You know, I dreamed of having a musical home and so I put my child in violin lessons to do that, right? And so often when I ask parents, why are you coming to violin lessons? They're like, oh we want my our kid to love music. Um, but something I learned as a parent is your child is not gonna learn to love music by going taking them to violin lessons. They're gonna learn to love music by watching you love music. And by having a musical home, the way to have a musical home is to make music in your home. So put the violin away and sing as a family. Dance as a family. I mean the very basic is sing lullabies to your kids but around the campfire sing when you're in the kitchen seeing and don't just be music consumers of listening to the radio, but actually being music makers of singing and dancing. Those are the ways to have a musical family and to teach your child to love music, learn, get comfortable making music yourself. You know, we're no longer a music making culture unfortunately. So having an environment where you are safe to sing and you're safe to move and you build those skills of making music with your child can be really valuable to take back into the home.

Christine Goodner ([27:03](#)):

Thank you for that. Uh, I like to wrap up our conversations by having you share sometimes I'll say a favorite practice tip or just a practice tip that comes to mind to you after our conversation today. What would you like to leave us with about practice this week? Uh, what's something we could leave people with as they're thinking about their own music practice this week?

Crystal Boyack ([27:24](#)):

Thanks for asking Christine. You know, our kids learn more from our actions than they do from our words. So we can tell our kids to practice. But I really encourage, and my husband and I do this and I encourage my families and my studio to do this is find something that you are going to practice. That's your thing every day and let your kids see you build your skills every day and you do something hard. This is outside of work, this is outside of parenting. Okay. This is something that you do for you. So it may be going to yoga, it may be learning a new language, but let your child see you work every single

day at something that's hard. And then one tradition we have around the kitchen table is we say our favorite thing each day, our least favorite thing each day and then something we did that's hard. So our kids get to hear me and my husband and all the other siblings say something that was hard that day. And often the hard thing often correlates with also what their favorite thing was. <laugh>, you know, today I went to yoga class and I did a pose I'd never done before and it was so hard, but it was also my favorite 'cause I got that pose down right. And let them see your example of practicing daily and pushing through even when it's hard.

Christine Goodner ([28:41](#)):

That's a great tip. I love that. It's good for kids to see they're not the only ones struggling through something that's hard.

Crystal Boyack ([28:47](#)):

Right. And as parents, we so often push our own desires and wishes on our kids instead of accepting them as our own. Right. I want my kid to be amazing, so I'm gonna make them practice, I'm gonna take them to all the sports, but really we need to take ownership of ourselves and what we have control over. And like you said earlier, our kid may or may not do that, but we have control over what we will do and our kid will learn from our example more than they'll learn from what we're telling them is important.

Christine Goodner ([29:17](#)):

So, so true. Well, crystal, thank you for being here today. It was wonderful to speak with you. I look forward to the next time we can do this.

Crystal Boyack ([29:25](#)):

Thank you so much. I'm so glad you're back. Christine. Welcome back.