



Episode 43: An Interview with Barbie Wong

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

Well, welcome everybody. I'm excited today to be talking to Barbie Wong and Barbie you were here in episode 33 on the podcast, so listeners can go back and listen to our conversation there to get to know more of your story as a musician, and I think practicing with your own children, we discussed and you know, what you've learned along the way. But for those who haven't met you yet, could you give us a brief introduction to who you are and what you do in the world of music?

Barbie Wong ([00:24](#)):

Yes. I am a parent. I have two kids who are now teens, so that's been really fun. And I also am a Suzuki piano teacher and I would say I've actually shifted away from teaching as much. My studio is not as big because I have just fallen in love with working with parents and music teachers. I just, I feel like - essentially kind of what you do, Christine, is, to give information to parents and music teachers on how to make this journey of raising a musical child, uh, the most rewarding and the least painful <laugh> it can be.

Christine Goodner ([01:05](#)):

I love that. It's very rewarding to do, and you and I are both parents, and I think once we've been through process with our children, we realize how much, you know, we, maybe we wished people would have talked to us about some of this <laugh>.

Barbie Wong ([01:17](#)):

Yes. Well, that's right. I feel like essentially I'm, I'm teaching my younger self. When my older daughter was four years old and I was struggling, like I really wish I had all the information then that I have now.

Christine Goodner ([01:35](#)):

I couldn't agree more. I also feel like I'm talking to my former self. There's that quote about, you know, be who you wish you would've had in your life. I'm, I'm kind of butchering the exact quote, but I really think about that when I'm thinking about what I want to share or why I am motivated to do this. I like

the terminology you use about raising a musical child rather than maybe a musician or some, some other ways I've heard that referred to. I would love to hear your thought process and like how, how you think about what you do and what you're nurturing. because I imagine you're, you're talking about more of the whole picture of a child's environment or maybe who they feel like they are versus just skills on an instrument when you say that.

Barbie Wong ([02:12](#)):

Yeah I mean, and this is the thing about being musical, which I didn't really come to realize until my daughter Tenzin really got into dance. You know, she was not that happy to practice her cello or her piano. And it only occurred to me later, I think I was reading, um, some, some sort of pamphlet on like, you know, how to bring music to, to the world, uh, that they talk about dance as a form of music. You know, it's, it's essentially music embodied physically. And then I, I realize, oh, there's many different ways to be musical and even, you know, my mom, who I love, but has minuscule musical abilities. She can still be musical in her ways. And so, yeah, I'd like to think about music and also thinking about how do we engage child in a way that really sees them as a whole person. So it's not just a, you must learn how to execute <laugh>, you know, in these particular skills on this particular instrument, but how do you develop musical skills? And also how do you develop as a person?

Christine Goodner ([03:16](#)):

I love that. I think if you're a parent listening to this who's in the trenches with those young children like we both have had in the past, there can be a lot of pressure it feels like, to do the technical things just right or will my, is my child, you know, cut out for this and that kind of thing when we see, see all of the issues going on, because this is what imperfect process to learn an instrument. And I think it's really helpful to think about a child as a whole person and what will they get out of this as a musical person their whole life. Whatever happens with their instrument in their hands right now.

Barbie Wong ([03:46](#)):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And, and, you know, as, as somebody who can see and also hear, you know, what's technically the correct way of doing things, it's really fun actually to then watch, you know, go to live music concerts or watch videos and, you know, like I think I was watching Taylor Swift the other day. I was like, oh, um, her technically, her piano skills are not, you know, completely excellent, but she's an, she's an amazing musician, so it's okay that she doesn't have, you know, all of these specific technical things down. But she's come to develop a love for music, and I think that's much more important than these little nitpicky skills that sometimes can get in the way of kids really enjoying music and us enjoying the process.

Christine Goodner ([04:30](#)):

And if she wanted to be a classically trained pianist who was entering competitions, she might pay more attention to that. But that's not, you know, that's not only thing to do with music. I think that's really helpful to keep in mind. I know one of the things we wanted to talk about today, which, you know, lines up with this a bit, is about the community. You know, having the power of community and a young musician's life. I, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the importance of community.

Barbie Wong ([04:55](#)):

Yeah, community is so important and it's something I think, especially when we are in this, most of us, when a lot of us are taking music lessons, a lot of them are private lessons. When that's really important,

that's really helpful. But I think what ends up happening is a lot of children experience music in isolation. So they go to their music lessons with their one teacher, and if they're lucky, the teacher's a great teacher and they have a good bond. Um, and a lot of times for some students that is really, you know, that, that works, that helps sustain their desire to make music. But for a lot of kids, like that's not enough. They need a community. They need to make music with other people, you know, other people in a variety of ages, but especially people their age. So they need to become friends with people who make music.

Barbie Wong ([05:47](#)):

And in my research, I've researched over 50 musicians to try to uncover what was happening in their childhoods to see if, you know, if they had any similarities. One of the big factors that come into play is essentially when they were kids, they spent time making music with other people. And so that's just so much more fulfilling. I mean, that's essentially why I'm here. I actually hated practice until I went to music camp and suddenly I was in a community of people. And it was so much fun because, you know, music shouldn't be done in isolation. It should be done in a group of people with people for people, um, for others. And it can be done for yourself. But, you know, with, with that community, that's, that's helpful. And I think also for parents too, we need a community. We need other people that will say, oh yeah, that's really hard too. I feel it. And so then having that sense of support really helps us not only feel less alone, but then it gives us more tools to try to figure out, oh, oh, you know, my friend said that they were doing this. Maybe I'll try that at home with my child. And so I think community is just so important for us all.

Christine Goodner ([07:00](#)):

Absolutely. I often say practicing alone in your room or just with your parent at home is not the point of learning the instrument. Like it's part of the process. Of course, musicians are practicing and preparing to make music with others alone sometimes, but it's that the thing that's exciting for a lot of students is, is that community piece. And I think especially paying attention to what kind of gets your child motivated and excited to play, and often that social piece is so important. Oh, yeah.

Barbie Wong ([07:25](#)):

Yeah, very much so and I think back actually to my nephews, I have nephews who are twins, and it's interesting to see their upbringing because, you know, obviously they're in the same environment growing up. But, you know, one of my nephews is now studying jazz trombone at UCLA and just is so head over heels in love with music, um, and is, you know, very excited to do music for his career. And his brother basically stopped playing, you know, his brother played the flute and stopped it years ago. And I was trying to figure out, well, what, what was the difference? What, you know, did anything different happen in their environment? And then I, when I was talking to them, I realized, oh, the nephew that is into music also had a best friend growing up who also played the trombone. And so they learned trombone together and they basically continued making music together up until college. And so that makes a huge difference. Just, just having just one friend who makes music is, is a huge, um, boost to musical longevity.

Christine Goodner ([08:32](#)):

Absolutely. So if there's someone listening who thinks, I can see my child needs more of that, but maybe their current best friends, nobody is playing the instrument. What, what advice would you give if we see

that, that the child needs more of that but don't have it right now? Like, how could we help as the parent in that situation?

Barbie Wong ([08:48](#)):

Well, I think it's always great to find group activities like, you know, band, orchestra, group lessons if possible. I mean, I always say, if you can sign your kid up for group lessons, group music lessons, I mean, sometimes I feel like that's more important than private lessons because then you sustain the child's interest. And then once the child has built up momentum and decides I want to keep making music, then you can, you know, transition into private lessons. So finding group music making activities, um, and of course music camps, they're phenomenal, especially sleep away camps because then the kids really bond and have a lot of fun.

Christine Goodner ([09:28](#)):

Exactly. I think putting our child in an environment where they can make those friends can really, really be helpful. And I know for my own students, you know, we have a private lesson and then a group lesson that's included in, in their tuition, and that that piece can be really, really helpful. So motivating to be around other people making music. And sometimes in the schools here, there is not orchestra in the schools, unfortunately, right where I live until that some of those students can feel like, oh, I'm the only one I know that plays a violin, for example. But so it's really important for them to get in those social community orchestras, group lessons in the studio, that kind of thing. If you have a friend down the street even that plays a different instrument, could they get together and be you at buddies, you know? Musical play dates. Oh yeah. Sometimes that can help too. Yeah, well

Barbie Wong ([10:10](#)):

That's true. In fact, one of the parents that, that was taking my class, she said that recently she found out that her daughter's friend plays the guitar, and it was, it was so great. She sent me a video, she's like, oh, yeah, you know, because her daughter plays the recorder. She's like, we got them together. And then they figured out a song that they could play together, and they were so excited. And, you know, just hearing those stories, I'm like, okay, all right. It's, it's possible. It doesn't have to be really fancy, but it's, you know, really possible for parents to get kids together.

Christine Goodner ([10:44](#)):

And I think part of what we're talking about is that community is motivation too for the young musicians. because that often helps with the " how do I motivate my child to want to work on the things at home?" Like this is a really powerful motivation. I know as a high schooler, I didn't often wanna practice, but I did want to go to orchestra and see my friends and know my parts.

Barbie Wong ([11:02](#)):

Yeah. Oh yes, that's right. That's sort of positive peer pressure sometimes.

Christine Goodner ([11:07](#)):

Yeah. And just seeing other people make music can be so, so motivating. So I love that. You were talking a bit about the course you do and somebody you met through there. Could you tell us a bit about that work that you do?

Barbie Wong ([11:19](#)):

Yeah. Uh, so I, you know, I give courses. Most of them, it's pretty much online because it, it allows parents, actually, even local parents, it's nice. It allows them to just be like, okay, kids be in this other room, you can be here. but yeah, it's, it's called How Raise a Musical Child. And we just go through just a lot of different ideas on how do you set the strong foundation to, you know, specific practice techniques and also things like how do you find the right music teacher, select the right instrument. And it's nice because even though there's a core of information in each class, each time we do it, um, it's six weeks long, it's an hour each. Um, it's different because the parents bring something different to it. So I feel like we, we have the materials that we go over and then we have both the discussions.

Barbie Wong ([12:07](#)):

And by the way, at the end of each hour long session, the parents have to give themselves some sort of homework. You know, they have to say, okay, so given all this, you know, I would like to do this for my homework this week. And they'll try something out. And it's what's great is then they come back the next week and say, Hey, I tried it out and it worked, or Ooh, this didn't work very well, let's, can we talk about it? So it's, it's really nice. Parents have seen, you know, a lot of improvements in desire to make music and it's been great. Also, again, community, they get to be with each other. And I'm excited actually this year because my course this year is going to involve a bigger community, um, component. We have a place where we can, it's sort of like a little Facebook group, but it's not Facebook so we have a place where we're gonna land and then we can exchange a lot of different information and it's gonna be also much more fun.

Christine Goodner ([12:58](#)):

Yes That community piece for the parent or the practice coach, if it's grandmother, aunt, and uncle, if you're listening as well, I think that's, that's really, really important. And sometimes it's actually helpful or maybe easier to be more honest about struggles when it's not your own teacher, like having an outside community to bring your woes and your struggles to, I do find when I go to speak to other teachers, students, sometimes I, I will, or maybe real picture of the ups and downs and when I talk to the families of my studio who feel like they have to sort of show me that they're doing a good job or doing what I ask. And I think it's really healthy to have a place where we can just kind of not feel like we have to groove anything, but we can just all come and say, okay, this is not easy for any of us, or We all need help or ideas or resources. So I love that you're doing that. Yeah,

Barbie Wong ([13:40](#)):

Thank you.

Christine Goodner ([13:42](#)):

We'll make sure that there's a link for people to find, you know, you and what you're doing in our show notes so that if anybody would like to do that with you, um, they can, they can get that support. That's really, that's great. I think the more, more people talking about all of this, the better.

Christine Goodner ([13:59](#)):

So another thing we were, you had mentioned that you wanted to speak about today a little bit was the idea of love first. And I am curious because I I don't even know <laugh>, I dunno what that thought is yet, but I love the sound of it. So I'd love to hear,

Barbie Wong ([14:12](#)):

You know, I think about a lot about how can I really help parents get to the point where it's not such a struggle with, with kids. And in fact I was consulting with this parent yesterday and she said, you know, I read Amy Chua's book, the Tiger Mom book. And in it, you know, she just talks about how, you know, she does all these things and her daughter ends up just quitting anyway, quitting music anyway, even though she's, you know, put in all this effort. And she's like, well, is it even worth it? She do, I even start because she has she has a five-year-old and, you know, I I just thought, wow, you know, it really depends on what her intention is. I mean, I don't know what Amy Chua's intentions are, but I did not like her techniques because I feel like a lot of that came from fear and it came from a place of like, wanting to control the child.

Barbie Wong ([15:10](#)):

And so that's why I thought, you know what, I really think what we really need to think about first is love. Like how do we bring love, our love for our children to this whole process? And so I, you know, love first is just a little shorthand way of saying, okay, let's approach this with love at the very beginning. Because when you love first, that means that you first of all love yourself. You know, you get to know yourself so you understand, okay, I might need some support in helping my child do this, or I'm struggling, or this is not working, or these are my limits. And so putting love first means that you reach out when you need some help. And putting love first also means that you give love to your child. So you see your child's potential, you focus on the positives as much as you can, and you apologize when things gory and you end up yelling at your child, which is something I have done.

Barbie Wong ([16:07](#)):

And so, you know, recognizing your limits and also realizing that, okay, I want to bring love to the table and I want to love my child, but I also realize that sometimes it's really hard. And I guess the, the third component of love first is seeing the big picture. So seeing that your child won't necessarily understand why they need to practice every day, what this is all about. Because as you've taught us, I love this about what your work, Christine is that, you know, you've said, look, the kids don't have the executive functioning skills yet to understand <laugh> how to do most of these things. And so putting love first means that you see the big picture, you understand the child's limited view, and you still proceed. You still say, okay, all right, I understand you don't like practice or you don't like such and such and we're still gonna practice. So today, how about doing such and such? Um, so I, I just, I think if we can put love first, it makes everything much easier. It's not an easy path, but I think it's the path that I think most of us wanna be on.

Christine Goodner ([17:15](#)):

I think the love for ourself as the, the parent or caregiver helping with this process is really important. Mm-Hmm, <affirmative>, I, I have some training from this circle of security organization, which is about attachment, uh, healthy attachment. And one of the things I talk about is this imagery of like hands and that, you know, the child does feel loved or securely attached when there's somebody to say like, I am here to help you with this. Like, I can, you know, I am, I am the, the strong capable adult that will help you with the parts you can't handle yourself. Which is a lot of what you're talking about this, I guess I always feel sad when I hear that there is a damaged relationship because of practice with it. I hear adults now who will say, well, my, this parent practice with me. But we fought so much that I think our relationship never got over it. And what you're talking about sort of prevents that danger <laugh> because if we're so involved with our child's musical experience, having love be the primary driving force will help make sure our relationship stays intact through all of that intense involvement, you know?

Barbie Wong ([18:10](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And it, and it's not easy, I mean, because you have to be open to experiencing difficult emotions both in yourself and in your child. And sitting with that is can be so painful. And so I, I mean I've definitely, there are many times when I've pushed my children's, you know, emotions away, but I've come to learn that the more you push it away, the more you know, it's just, it's like whack-a-mole, it's gonna appear somewhere else. And so a more compassionate way is to just say, okay, we're going to sit with it and I might tremble and I might feel really awkward, but if we sit with it and if I acknowledge my child is experiencing these difficult emotions that as you said, that gives them a sense of security, that's how we can really help them through these difficult emotions.

Christine Goodner ([19:03](#)):

And I've heard other experts say if our children's big emotions, if they feel like, "oh, my emotion is scary to my parent," that that's actually very frightening to the child. Versus like, okay, I can sit with you, you know, you can feel your whatever this is and you know, I'll be here for you when you're done feeling it is really actually a very loving and, you know, secure feeling for the child that they're not freaking us out. Yeah. They're having these really huge emotions.

Barbie Wong ([19:29](#)):

<affirmative>. Yeah. So true. So true. Yep.

Christine Goodner ([19:33](#)):

Yeah, definitely the things I wish were talked about more when I was practicing with my own children and even just maybe our generation of, you know, just how parenting was talking about when, you know, my kids are just slightly older than yours, but I don't think people talked about all of this so much when it comes to parenting.

Barbie Wong ([19:48](#)):

Yeah, well, I mean, I don't think people really talked about parenting. That's true. <laugh>. And, and, and nowadays too, I think it can be hard because I think with, you know, the preponderance of screens, you know, screens are very easy. Oh, the child is upset, the child is, you know, whatever. And even us, ourselves, there are times when I'm like, oh, I'm really upset. And then I look at my phone, I was like, ah, <laugh>, you know, instant joy. But then really I haven't really processed those emotions. So, you know, I think sometimes it's like, okay, hold on, my child is upset. I, shouldn't just be like, Hey, let's go and have a fun experience. It's like, oh, okay, alright, let's sit with you and just be there.

Christine Goodner ([20:32](#)):

Yeah. We can definitely acknowledge those of you doing practice work with your children that it's not easy.

Barbie Wong ([20:39](#)):

It's not easy. It is not easy. And I would just say <laugh>, every time you sit down and you, if you bring love first, even as an attempt, you have succeeded,

Christine Goodner ([20:50](#)):

As you mentioned earlier, loving ourselves even, even when we parent imperfectly because nobody is the perfect parent.

Barbie Wong ([20:57](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. And everybody brings with them all of these things that they've got from their childhoods, from, you know, all their experiences. And then you have to add to that your specific child's personality. And sometimes it works really well, the parent and the child, but sometimes, you know, the personalities just don't align well when it comes to practice. So it really depends on, you know, a lot of different factors.

Christine Goodner ([21:24](#)):

And I think that's where I love your love first concept. And one thing I always say is just thinking about, okay, how do I help this child practice? Well, <laugh>. And you know, sometimes it's be letting them be a little more independent even though we're still there, but like making more choices. And sometimes it's like, I'm just going to tell you what to do because the choices stress you out or whatever it happens to be. It is so dependent on the child.

Barbie Wong ([21:42](#)):

Yeah.

Christine Goodner ([21:44](#)):

Yeah. Hard work. We're both taking big breaths as we're talking about this

Barbie Wong ([21:51](#)):

It's like, glad I got through a lot of those days. <laugh>.

Christine Goodner ([21:56](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Hats off to all the parents doing it right now.

Barbie Wong ([22:00](#)):

Oh my gosh, yes, I commend all parents who are spending time with their children with practice. because that's . . . it's not easy and just, I would say just, just doing that is an act of love. Just knowing that you want your child to, to make music and to love it. it's a labor of love.

Christine Goodner ([22:20](#)):

Yes And I think, you know, your community idea being plugged into a musical community can also takes a little bit of the pressure that it's all on me as the parent to get my child <laugh>, doing all the things musically. I do think having other resources, the group that you offer or something like that, books, you know listening to this podcast, being in the community with other musicians, all those things. I think when we get to the end of our rope, we're feeling like this is just really a lot. That's where the community and the what resources are out there to support us is so important. Yeah. I definitely had to plug into that myself. And I just encourage you when you get to those moments, that's the time to think about, okay, who could my child practice with maybe this week or give a performance to by my FaceTime or whatever it happens to be, just to bring some other people alongside of us.

Barbie Wong ([23:07](#)):

Yes. That, I'm glad you mentioned that because yeah, especially during the pandemic, I think there were, I think I basically set up with my relatives from afar. I was like, okay, um, for the next month, every Monday I was like, you're practicing for grandma and then every Tuesday you're practicing for Aunt Debbie and you know, so forth. Because it got to the point where I was like, oh, I don't think I could practice with you every day, <laugh>. This is too much.

Christine Goodner ([23:34](#)):

Absolutely. And I've heard teachers who will team up a teen in their studio with a younger student to be a practice buddy once a week or you know, maybe that's the time you, is there a musical play date with somebody down the street that's even like, okay, play a few songs for your friend and they'll play a songs, few songs for you, even if you're learning different music or different pieces, you can get creative with it and just figure out how do we get that like extra support for ourselves so it's not just on us because that's a lot. I feel like all the pressure's on me to have my child be successful at this.

Barbie Wong ([24:00](#)):

Yes And oh, one idea I loved that I heard from a parent is that she would have, she has two kids, she said once a week her kids had a practice together, but they could do anything as long as it was musical. And so her, her kids, I mean, you know, they kind of goof off, but like, think about that, it's like you're goofing off and enjoying music together during that practice session. so I thought that was genius.

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

Oh, I love that. I love that. Well we hope some of these ideas maybe spark some creativity in you if you're listening and thinking about how do we for I think joyful and that love centered music practice and is very, you know, music it learning instrument is a very technical endeavor and there are a lot of details and it, we just get stuck there and only think about that piece of it. It can, you can get a little bogged down, I think. So yes, as a teacher I want my students to have good technique and

Barbie Wong ([24:50](#)):

Oh yeah, that's right. Good point.

Christine Goodner ([24:53](#)):

Work on those things. But also I don't want it to be at the expense of all of these other things we're talking about

Barbie Wong ([24:58](#)):

<laugh>.

Christine Goodner ([24:59](#)):

So yeah, we encourage you to think, think of that as well. Well I know Barbie, you and I could just talk all day about all of these topics, but for today, for this, this conversation, I wondered if you could leave listeners with a practice tip or idea. And it could be related to something we've already said, but what's a practice idea or tip we could leave listeners with for this week?

Barbie Wong ([25:20](#)):

I think when it comes to practice, I think the, the first thing to realize about practice is that it is not an easy process. That practice is different from playing, you know practice is the hard work that you put in so that eventually you can get to the playing part, which is really easy. And so because practice is so hard or it can be so hard, then I like to use the peak end rule to really make practice a little a lot easier. And so the peak end rule basically is, you know, it's actually a, a scientifically based idea, which is that people remember not the average of the experience that you have of an event, but they remember the peak experience and what happens at the end. And so if you can start and end each practice session with something that's fun or positive, then your child more likely, then not, they will remember those parts much more easily.

Barbie Wong ([26:29](#)):

I usually just say, Hey, when you start your practice session, you can play whatever you want as a warmup. And that's the time when the parent cannot say anything negative about the child's playing. Because even if your child is messing it massively or playing like a speed devil, it's okay because you want that part to be sort of the playing part. The same with the very end of the practice session end on something that your child really wants to play. And regardless of, you know, if your child just practiced something and did it in a certain way and then they play something and they've messed up on it, still don't say anything because you want them to end on a high note. So give that a try and I'm curious to hear how it goes for everyone.

Christine Goodner ([27:16](#)):

I love that. I couldn't agree more. Great, great idea. I would love to hear how that goes for you, everyone that's listening, Barbie Wong, thank you so much for joining us. Again, we'll link to some of the resources you have and your website and social media so people can connect with you if they haven't yet. And I really appreciate your time and ideas today.

Barbie Wong ([27:34](#)):

Thank you so much, Christine. I, I love what you do. I really enjoy talking to you and I'm excited that we can help. I'm hoping at least one person get through this journey a little easier.