



## Episode 56: Using Games in Music Practice with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

Welcome everyone. I am happy to be with you here today. And recently, in our interview with Dr. Molly Gabrielian, she suggested a great way to implement her practice ideas about neuroscience and the brain was to put them into practice games. And so while we're not talking about her ideas, specifically today, I'm excited to welcome back Barbie Wong to share some ideas about practice games and music today. She and I really love talking about this topic and we've created some resources around this and had tons of conversations around this. And welcome back Barbie. Good to have you here again.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, thank you Christine. It's great to be here.

Christine Goodner:

Well, we wanted to kick off our conversation by just sharing a few reasons why we might incorporate games into music practice. I think Barbie and I both acknowledged that some parents love to play games with their children in music practice and others would just feel like, oh, I'd rather just go down the to-do list. And this is taking so much time.

There are some specific reasons why it's important to include this. I'll list a few and see if you want to add anything Barbie, but science has shown actually that children learn well through play and that actually it will take less repetitions to learn something often when we have play incorporated. So coming up with a practice game, and we definitely recommend simple, quick to implement practice games, but those can really help us actually be more efficient and effective in practice, which is counterintuitive to those of us who maybe don't gravitate or that's kind of practice, which I'll admit was me as a practice parent.

I've learned the value over time and I think they also just make the hard work of practice feel more tolerable or more enjoyable. And we talked on our last conversation about how we want there to be some play and enjoyment on the student's part so that they want to play their instrument. And I think games can really help us do that. And I think they can also just help us figure out how do we get in all

these tasks that we have in our practice sessions and help us structure a bit, which we'll talk about more. Anything you want to add about the why of Games Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I think games are really important in a lot of ways because I think sometimes if there's a parent child practicing together, a caregiver child, things can get a little tense and games are a way to just lighten things up so that because what we really want a strong, loving relationship between the practice partner and the child. And so games can help secure that when it seems like things become contentious. And I also love your idea about how kids, they don't their executive functioning skills fully set. I mean, not until they're in their twenties and so they can't see the big picture that we can. I hear adults all the time saying, oh, I wish I had stuck with this instrument. But when you're a child, you don't think that. And so games can really help the child stick to the task at hand as they can see. They can only see so far, but then it just makes it so much easier to get through the practice and then they gain the skills and then they feel really good about themselves.

Christine Goodner:

I think that's so important. I think I've heard a lot of people share in the interviews I do that once they started to think about practice as problem solving and find the fun in it, that's when they really started to enjoy practice. And so I think anything we can do to support that idea is really, really helpful. Well, maybe you could share one of our first thoughts about how we can use games and our practice or the kinds of games we could use.

Barbie Wong:

So there are several kinds of games, and one of them has to do with games that structure practice. So sometimes just going down the to-do list, it can be hard. Sometimes the child feels like, oh my gosh, one is this going to end. And so if you have a game that structures practice, it can give a layout to the child so they know, oh, okay, there are four parts of today's practice and if I can get through four parts, then that'll be okay. And one of my favorites is what you actually have suggested, which is to put each part on some sort of paper or a note card. What I do is I just get index cards and with the younger kids, I draw a picture, actually older kids sometimes like the picture too for sight reading. I put eyeglasses on there and for repertoire, I might draw a little book, whatever it is, different parts of the practice on each note card.

Then I'll actually put a number on that note card as well. Then we can use a dye and we can roll it even. There's different ways you can roll the dye and then the child can say, oh, okay, I guess I'm doing number two, which is site reading. And then they do that, or you can spread them around the room. They can go to each card and do that, or you can just have them choose a card face down or even face up. Some kids like that. So that's just one idea on how to structure your practice session.

Christine Goodner:

I think it's really, really helpful. The students can see the cards sort of being taken away. They finished them and like you said, then it's okay, now I can see when I am done, done for the day. And that can be really helpful. And it helps us sometimes as the adults to figure out how do I get all these things in? Or what if I forget something? So it's helpful on both sides. I also think it's really helpful to have games that help with repetition. I often think and talk to families about the fact that just tolerating the repetition needed to get practice done. Sometimes it's very challenging for young students. I think when they do get to that, oh, I like problem solving, then we kind of get over that barrier. But at first it can be really

tricky to get them to do more repetitions and as many as maybe we want them to form the habits and the connections in the brain and all of that.

So I think anything that you could use to count repetitions, sometimes I'll assign to my students, please do this five times or 10 times. So anything that you can use to count the repetitions at home. I have some little erasers that are animal shaped in my studio that are a big hit, and we'll just put them on one side of the music stand and then for each repetition, walk them down to the other side. It gives the student a little break. Sometimes I'll have them do three repetitions and then move the three items if you feel like they could handle more than that. But having an item to physically move I think also helps us to see that I am making progress. Again, I can see when my repetitions have been completed and there's a physical representation of that. There's endless possibilities of what you could move. Students tell me all sorts of things. Building with Lego bricks, making a tower, adding one little thing to a picture they're drawing. Just something that represents the repetition has been finished will really help. And then I think help your students tolerate that.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, repetitions are so important in skill development of almost pretty much anything that you're trying to do, but with music, learning an instrument in particular, and it can get so tedious. So those are some great ideas that you just suggested.

Christine Goodner:

And somebody told me yesterday, I was at a conference here in Oregon for Suzuki teachers that they knew somebody who was a college professor, and when he graded essays, every time he graded one long answer essay from a student, he ate some kind of M & M or something to get himself through the tedious task. And I just thought it's just human nature that sometimes things that feel like just plain work, we just need a little dopamine or a little out every word for ourselves to keep us going.

Barbie Wong:

Yes, yes. No, you're right. And I think that is part of it. I don't know the exact science, but I've heard that dopamine plays a huge role in motivation. So I think those little Lego blocks or whatever it is, it shows like, okay, I'm getting closer. I'm sure that's triggering the dopamine release.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. Yeah. I'm sure there's so many things if someone broke it down for us, the brain science that it does. But absolutely, I think that is actually a really important piece for sure. And then I think you have another kind of game you're going to share with us as well.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah. So in terms of different kinds of games that we can use, one idea are what I like to call imagination games or games that spark creativity. And creativity is so important in making music because I mean, a lot of what's being expressed through music is something that's really intangible or sometimes you can't even talk about it, but it is something that people want to express. And so I think that helping children start being creative even at a very young age, is so important. And it can be as simple as, Hey, what do you think the story is behind the song that you played? And a lot of kids will have so many stories that they have in their heads, and some kids will be excited, oh, this story is about this turtle who's going on this journey? Whatever it is, great. But then some kids might be completely blamed like, what?

There's a story in this song, in which case you can give them prompts. So I actually have these story cards, and you can use anything really. I mean, I actually created my own that I just found magazine pictures that I liked and I just pasted them onto index cards. But you can also buy story cards. And the story cards are supposed to prompt storytelling. But I think what you can do is you can say, oh, pick out of these three cards, which one of them seem like it best conveys the story of the song that you just played. And so then you're starting to help children think about expressing something through their music.

Christine Goodner:

I love that, and I think that's one of those things that can feel a little nebulous, is this actually productive? But I think if any of us think about music that we have loved hearing performed, usually it's because it makes us feel something and it's telling a story. So it's really, really worth our time to help a student think about what stories am I thinking about in this piece to make it more expressive and musical, which I think is a goal a lot of people have for their own playing or for young musicians playing that they're working with. So I love that. We hope this sparks some ideas for you about how you can incorporate music games as music teachers ourselves.

We spend a lot of time thinking about this, and I know as a parent who's practicing with your children or grandparent caregiver of any kind, sometimes in the moment of the practice room, it's a little tricky to think about, what am I going to come up with to help my child?

So we hope this sparks some creative ideas for you, and I always love hearing what people come up with because there's so much creativity that can be involved based on what your child is interested in, what makes it fun for you to practice with your child. That's also very, very valid to think about. And we're looking forward to hearing any ideas that you come up with after hearing some of these. I love that creativity and practice idea, but I think that's something I hadn't really put words to until I heard you talk about it before Barbie, so that's great.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, thank you. Thank you so much.

Christine Goodner:

Anything else you want to share before we go about games and music practice?

Barbie Wong:

Well, I think one of the funnest things that I've done this year so far has been creating this online music course that we put together because I think we have so many ideas, and I wanted to at least solidify these and then also make it accessible for any practice partners, any teachers who are interested in knowing more about games and how to play games in the practice room. And so I think it's great that we created that.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. I hope people will check that out. We can put a link to find that in the show notes. You don't have any pressure to join, but also if you're enjoying these conversations, you're like, oh, I'm really hungry for more specific ideas. It's good to know that that resource is out there for you and we'd love to share it with you, so we'll make sure we share that with you. And also a link to our online community that we're starting together to have conversations like this. We hope to have places where we can

support you with your music practice and short conversation to make it more enjoyable and more fun and more productive all at once is always my hope. So thanks for being here again, Barbie and chatting with me.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, it's great to be here. Thank you so much.

Christine Goodner:

Here is a short recap about games and music practice. Why do we want to play games potentially? Well, children learn well with less repetitions through play, and games are a great way to add play into our practice sessions. Games often make the focused discipline of practice more enjoyable and more tolerable. For many young music students, games can help us give our practice some structure. Games can also help us lighten things up and relieve tension in our practice relationship. If we are practicing together, sometimes it's hard for students to see the big picture or have the executive function skills to understand the why we are doing something and games give us a short term why in one way.

So the three different kinds of games that we talked about today included games that structure practice. For example, having note cards with the tasks on them and numbering them, using dice to choose which number or a scavenger hunt, or just turning over the cards one by one to see which task comes next.

Repetition games is the second kind of game we talked about, which is using various items to count repetitions in our practice. These give us a visual representation of the work that we're doing. Finally, imagination Games are the third kind of game that we shared, and I love what Barbie said about music being a way of expressing something that's intangible, and our imagination is one way that we can help do that. Giving students a way to think about that early on in their music journey, I think can be really helpful. So cards are a great way to do this and to start that process of imagination and linking up a story in our minds with the music that we are playing Barbie.

And I hope that this has given you some ideas to think about related to music and including games in our practice. And I hope it sparks your own ideas and creativity. We would love to hear what your favorite practice game is, or if something in this podcast particularly helped you that is so motivating to hear when we're putting together ideas to share with you. So you can leave either of us a message on Instagram. We will include the links to those in our show notes. Happy practicing this week. Time to Practice community. Looking forward to seeing you next week with another great interview. Take care.

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