



Episode 63: Should we use Rewards or Incentives for Music Practice? A conversation with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

All right, so welcome everyone. I'm excited to be back with a monthly episode with Barbie Wong today, and we are going to talk a bit about a hot button issue - something that we here talked about and asked about a lot, which is rewards or incentives related to music practice. So Barbie, thanks for joining me for this conversation.

Barbie Wong:

I'm so glad to be here.

Christine Goodner:

I guess I'd just like to start off by saying, if you're listening, it's okay to disagree with us. Some people have very strong feelings that this does not line up with their values or what they believe about working with their children, and that's perfectly fine. I would invite you just to listen to what we have to say in here. We're going to not say we have the answers to all of this, but sort of grapple with the issue ourselves and just talk about some things to think about or maybe even redefining what we're calling an incentive or reward in some ways and would love your feedback afterwards. Again, it's perfectly fine to listen to this and then have a strong feeling about it that's different than ours and we know that there's a lot of thoughts about this out there. So we, we'll just say that first as we get started. So just speaking of that Barbie, I wanted to start us off by having us talk about what are some concerns or maybe reasons people would not want to have rewards or incentives and practice that you've heard or even that you've had yourself. I don't know how you feel about it personally, I guess.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, it is a very good way to talk about this because a lot of people have probably heard the same things. There's research done where when they've rewarded kids and they've said, oh, you're going to get such and such prize, then compared to kids who don't have that prize looming, they find that the

kids without the prize that's going to come to them end up doing more creative work. And so then it feels like, oh wow. So I guess we shouldn't reward kids. And for me, this has been a topic that I've grappled with a lot because of course I want kids to do things because they intrinsically want to do it. I want them to achieve the highest levels possible to reach their potential. But as I've looked through this topic more and more and worked with many more parents and teachers that I've imagined, I'm realizing that, oh, actually, yes, there's this sort of ideal world that if we can achieve it, great. And some kids just naturally want to make music, but really in the world, I think most of us live in practice is hard day by day. Sometimes the kids just need just a little bit of something they can look forward to. That's not actually the music that they're making a sticker a chance to get ice cream if they practice so many days. That really gets them through the practice and honestly, for the parent involved, it helps get the parent through the practice and sometimes that's good enough.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I think that's so true, and we'll talk more about some of this, but I have found that the longer students play often they don't need these things in the same way. Maybe it's just here or there when their motivation hits a slump at first point with young students, I think where it just feels like this is very hard to do in any given moment. We may not want to do it even if we're glad we did it after, and we may want to play our instrument but not practice. It is in those kinds of situations that I think this really helps give us through points.

And I think I'll just add, when I talk to a lot of families with what I do and doing workshops and things, it is this violates our values or we worry about the long-term impact. Will my child never be internally motivated? Those are some of the concerns I hear come up. There's the punished by rewards book that's out there. And so I think all of those things, those are very valid and I think you're probably the same. We work with very conscientious parents that they're even seeking us out to talk about how do I practice with my child differently? And so they are weighing, is this the right thing to do long-term versus this makes it easier for us on our practice today, which hats off to everybody grappling with it because like I also grapple with that with my own children, and that's tricky. So yeah, we're there with you if you're listening and you feel ambivalent or back and forth about this. So you alluded to this a little bit, but what have you found out through your research, through talking to people through your own experiences that has shaped how you feel about this today versus when you first started thinking about it?

Barbie Wong:

Well, one of the main things I think about is actually what you've taught me is that kids executive functioning skills are not fully there developed until they're in their twenties, and so they can't see the big picture that we adults can and they can't see, oh, if I just practice every day for the next 10 years, I'm going to be able to achieve a certain mastery that I will be satisfied with. So they don't have that. And so I think realizing that kids, I love kids, I'm not saying that they're by any way deficient, but that's just who they are developmentally. And so if we can meet them where they are, I think we respect them a lot more by saying, oh, okay, they might need these things now. And to realize, as you were saying, this is not going to be forever, and as long as the reward isn't the only thing that they get out of it, if we are making sure that their environment is full of music, that they're socially engaged with other people doing music, and that we are a loving presence either as teachers or as parents, I think that really makes a big difference.

Christine Goodner:

I think so too. And I've done some research I'll share with listeners. One project I did with a colleague of mine, Dr. Rebekah Hanson, who works at the University of Portland here in Oregon, we did a research project on teens and motivation, and it was published in the American String Teachers Association Journal in 2022. I think I'll look up a link to share that if it's still available for reading. But we asked them questions about what motivates you now, what motivated you when you were young? What we found was so interesting was overwhelmingly, they said rewards, incentives are what made them want to practice when they were young. And then when we asked them what you are motivated by now, that didn't come up in their answers at all. And so it was very reassuring. I realized that's just one small study, but it fits with what I see in my own studio and what I experience as a musician too. It's just in that beginning part of our journey where it just feels hard and then we don't really understand, oh, I'm going to feel so great when I work this out in intense practice. Our brains can't even hold that, even if we experience it sometimes. But don't worry that that's not going to be forever. It doesn't mean if they were really rewarded by those rewards and prizes that later, they can't be rewarded by the music itself. Exactly what we saw come out of that project that we did. Yeah,

Barbie Wong:

That's great. I love that. That's fantastic. It actually reminds me of research when I need to figure out what the actual sources, but I've been hearing about research that they say when people are in a state of play, when they feel like they're just playing around that they learn better, and in some ways, rewards or games that can put kids in a state of play so that they're much more amenable to making those repetitions five times or 10 times whatever is needed. So I think just realizing that it's also shifting the mindset through the rewards can be really helpful

Christine Goodner:

In a way we're meeting kids where they are, and I think it's helpful to trust the process that later that intrinsic motivation is going to come. That's covers some ideas for people to think about. And what maybe has shifted our perspective. And then I know you've done a lot of research on the lives of musicians and their experiences. Is there anything that you've learned from that research that's made you think about rewarding environments if nothing else, that people have grown up in?

Barbie Wong:

Well, I mean a lot of these musicians, what's really happening in their childhoods is that they're growing up in such musically rich households that it's almost like, it's like they're breathing music. So yeah, I would say the more classical, classically trained musicians, I mean, it's a lot more difficult, I would say to get kids to practice classical music. It can be so tedious, and a lot of them will get rewards when they're young. The other ones, I would say a lot of times they're just influenced by what's in their environment, but really what's in their environment often is a kind adult or some sort of mentor that's just very loving towards them. And so I think having that is what really gets them very excited and is rewarding in a sense. And so sometimes I guess we can think about rewards not just as treats and stickers, but also attention from an adult, the contact that you have, the connections that are made.

Christine Goodner:

Sure, sure. I think we didn't really define what are we calling rewards, so maybe that's a different conversation, but just being rewarded by praise, for example, or, oh, you get to participate in this thing because you've done the work to learn whatever piece you're working on, so you get to have a

participation reward in some way. I think there's some things like that that are intangible that are going on that we may or may not think of as rewards. So yeah, thanks for sharing that. I think that's helpful. I think environment is such a big piece. We'll have to talk about that another time that we meet to talk about these things. So we are going to share each maybe three considerations or three things that we think are important to think about if you are considering incentives or rewards with your child. Again, if you are like, no way, I'm not doing that, that's fine.

You can just listen and no one is going to force you to do that. But a few things that we think will be good to keep in mind. So I'll just start off with the first one that I always share with people is just pick a reward or incentive that fits with your values. For example, as a parent didn't want to buy electronics or video games or I guess there's anything that costs a lot of money. It wasn't necessarily my budget as a parent of young students back then either, but it didn't really line up with my value system that way. But there were certain things I often suggest to people, maybe we have a certain goal for practice and then you're going to make the favorite dessert of your child with them on the weekend, or they get to pick out the family movie or you're going to do something quality. For some people, that kind of reward feels a lot more comfortable than buying something. We're not talking necessarily about buying something, I guess I want to say. So keep in mind just if something feels like, oh, I don't like the idea of this thing as a reward, then just don't do that and pick something that lines up with your values. Barbie, what would you like to share?

Barbie Wong:

Actually, something very similar. I think it's important to find rewards that fit the child and not just the child, but in that moment or in the period of time that it fits the child. So we both have multiple children and also we work with families with multiple children, and we know every child is different. And so some children are going to be excited about stickers and some are like, I don't really care, but they might be more motivated by doing a coloring page and each time they practice something, they can color in a little spot. I mean, who knows? It really depends on the child, and then it depends on also what the child is into in that moment. So it could change in the next week, in the next five weeks, or maybe it'll last for a year or several years. So just keeping that in mind that you might have to figure out different rewards for different children.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, very true, very true. And I think also linked to that, I would consider quality time a reward. I think I'm a Suzuki teacher, and so there's a lot of parent or caregiver involvement in the practice. And so I think it really helps support that if what you're doing as a reward is we are doing something together, whatever that is, a walk in nature, again, baking cookies or whatever on the weekend, but that itself could be a reward. So if your child really, I talked to families with multiple children, for example, and they say practice is sort of very special because their child gets one-on-one time with a parent. That's very precious. And so a reward where we get to do something together that's special could be a really nice way to reward our practice. So that's one tangible example I would love to give.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, that's great. I love that. I love that so much. And I think another thing that I would really consider when you're thinking about rewards is find rewards where you are okay with following through with it. So think about long-term. So are you okay with supplying a few hundred stickers if that's what the reward is? I mean, this is pretty much, I mean, applies to a lot of things that you want to set sort of parameters around, but can you actually follow through? So if you actually don't have the availability to

do quality time, don't promise that. But if you do, then great and just realize, look ahead what is possible when you offer certain rewards.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, that's such a good point. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Then another thing I would say related, we're talking about stickers, but a lot is examples, but just being as a reward that feeds the habit of your music making, I think is really important. And I had an email exchange with Gretchen Rubin once who's an author I really admire, and I'm just on her email list, and she responded to me, but I asked her, what would you consider rewards when you're talking about building habits that could be related to music? And this was a few years ago when I was first mulling this over and she said, just pick something that feeds that habit that you're trying to make. So it could be musical stickers or just stickers that only exist in the space of music in the practice room. For example. Sometimes if there's a piece of music, your child sheet music, your child wants to learn how to play something, a reward, like, oh, we will go pick out some sheet music that you're really wanting to work on, things like that. So it doesn't mean every reward has to fall in that category, but if you're trying to think about what would you like to do or what experts recommend, it's like something that wills in the habit of practice. It could be even just a little toy that could be used for games in the practice room, something like that. Those are a few ideas to get you what your creative ideas going would work for your child.

Barbie Wong:

I love that. And I think that it actually reminds me of when my kids were younger, I spoke to them in Mandarin, and I wanted to reward them for speaking mandarin and things of that sort. So one of the rewards was actually to watch a movie and it was in Mandarin, but they didn't care because they were so excited to watch the movie. So yeah, I guess similarly, you could use rewards like, Hey, we're going to watch this musical, or something that's music related, and then everybody gets very excited. But in terms of also, I like this idea of really thinking about the habit that developing. One of the things I did with kids, we actually didn't do that many rewards. We actually did what I would call privileges. So they had to actually just practice their instrument before they can go and do other things before they had the privilege to do other things.

So whether it was use a device or hang out with friends or just hang out, they had to just get their music practice done. And at the beginning, it was hard because again, I had to follow through. I had to be there, I had to make sure the practice was done. But through the years, they just got into that habit and it became this thing where they were like, oh, yeah, okay. They knew Sunday morning they wake up, they're like, oh, if I want to go and do such and such, I'm just going to practice. And then suddenly it was just easy. So there is a reward for you as the parent that if you continue doing these things and you're consistent, then you can be the rewards of your child just naturally going to the instrument.

Christine Goodner:

I think that's so true, and that's something that carries into adulthood this morning before we recorded, I got my own practice done and I exercise, and I was like, I need to do those things before I go on other things in my day because I feel so much better when they're not hanging over my head as to do items. And I think kids can just experience what that feels like. I probably learned that through my own musical upbringing, even though I don't remember exactly, but it's just a great life skill we're giving our kids when we do that.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, yeah, it is.

Christine Goodner:

Well, anything else you want to share about incentives before we move on?

Barbie Wong:

I guess in terms of incentives? Well, I think that, I guess just to think about the fact that this is sort of amorphous topic in a sense. I mean, we are trying to put very specific ideas behind it, but just to realize that, hey, it's okay that this is not definite. And again, some people might not like this topic or might not having rewards, so I think that's totally okay to have these feelings about it. But at the end of the day, I would say, well, what's going to work? What is going to work to make practice happen? And sometimes it is doing rewards that you might not be excited about, but if the child is excited, then I was saying, go with the child.

Christine Goodner:

Agreed. And I think if nothing else, I would love people just to release any guilt they have if that's what's working for them right now to get their child to practice. My colleague, Rebecca Hanson and I did the talk about our research to a group of local musicians and teachers a year or so ago, and we asked them, what do you remember motivating you? And a lot of them said, I was motivated by rewards, but I kind of feel guilty about that. I feel like I shouldn't have been. And I think if nothing else, I'd just like to say it's so normal, and it would be nice not to carry around guilt that we're either a musician, we needed that when we were younger or we're doing something wrong with our parenting, what we've read to do. It's, I think it's human nature sometimes to need some outside motivation and children or not. That's just sometimes necessary to get us through to our goals, and I hope people can just kind of release any guilt they have about that.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, that is a great point. Yes, I know. I need a really, I mean, that's the hard thing about I think raising kids in general is there can be so much guilt associated with it, but yeah, the less guilt we have, the easier we can move through life and spend that time connecting with our kids.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, exactly. Very well said. I think just like, okay, what does my child need right now to get to these things that we need them to do is really helpful. Do you have any words of caution or things, pitfalls or things you think people should watch out for when they're considering the incentives? I think one thing that comes to mind for me is what you said earlier about different rewards and incentives might have appealed to different children even at different times. So if you try something that doesn't work, I'd just like people to know that's okay, and just realize we're so different. And it might take some trial and error to figure out what your child is interested in.

Barbie Wong:

I think this whole search into figuring out the right rewards or the rewards that work for your child, it's a journey. And I mean, if you have not failed in a journey of raising a child, then you might not be human. I mean, this is just what happens. So I would say just expect to fail in doing some of these things. But those failures are just lessons. They're just ways to say, oh, okay, we're not going to do this for my child now. And it could be that the child's not ready for the reward. They might want that reward in six

months or in two years. So it's okay to just realize that this is going to be an experiment, and if you can go in with it, what a scientist would do, be like, oh, is this going to work? Okay. It's not, let's put that aside and just have a more non-attached attitude.

I think that could be much more easy of a journey. I think also it's good to think about just, I mean, this is a topic we could go on with this topic for hours. And I think also if you're listening to realize that it's good to delve into this and maybe talk to other people or do some research, I'd like to invite people to just think about this, but also to do your own experimentation, because I think there's so much richness when you start to explore this. And I'm sure there's so many listeners who have so many amazing ideas. In fact, I would invite them to share those with us because every time I do a presentation and I get feedback, it's amazing how I go, oh wow, that is an amazing reward. I've never thought of that, or I've never heard of it. And I'm sure there's just so many ideas out there that are just fabulous, and I would love to hear them.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, yes. And I think about if you are a musician yourself or just anything else you've done in your life that is a long-term project, and maybe just do you remember what motivated you when you very first began that endeavor? And even what do you do to motivate yourself now? And I think just reflecting a bit and realizing that we all need our sources of motivation, and so an incentive or reward is just, yes, it's outside of us, but it's just a source of motivation. I'm hoping as a teacher to get us through those tough points. Oh, yeah.

Barbie Wong:

I agree.

Christine Goodner:

All right. Well, thank you Barbie for coming back and speaking with me. It's always a pleasure to discuss these ideas, and like you said, we could have talked about this for hours, but I hope we gave people some food for thought and maybe some encouragement to, like you said, let go of the parent guilt that we can all feel.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, that's right. Go out, experiment, try it out and let us know how it goes. Right.

Transcript created by Rev.com