



Episode 68: Practice Challenges with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

All right. Welcome everyone. I'm excited to welcome Barbie Wong back to the podcast this week. She's been our regular guest on this season's podcast. We get to have some fun conversations about topics related to music and practice. So Barbie, welcome back.

Barbie Wong:

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Christine Goodner:

Well, today we're excited to talk about the idea of a practice challenge and we want to frame this as either if you're a family listening to this who supports a young musician in your family, maybe you could think of doing this your own little mini challenge as a family. Or if you're a teacher or you run a program, maybe your whole program could have a program wide practice challenge. I know many of us think about how we may incorporate that and help our students stay motivated. That can be a good time of year to put one of those in. I think one thing I would like to kick us off with talking about is just I think it's really important after doing some practice challenge to help people define what counts for the practice challenge. And it can feel maybe sometimes like we're not being strict enough or only a certain kind of practice should count. And so what are your thoughts about how one might define what counts as practice for a practice challenge Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

Well, I think it's good to see what is happening now with practice. For instance, if your child is practicing most days of the week, then yes, I think it's great to then have a little higher bar in terms of what counts. So they have to be at their instruments practicing for at least 10 minutes or at least three quarters of the practice charts that they have to complete. But if your child is only getting to the instrument once a week, then I would then just say getting to the instrument counts, getting to the instrument and sitting it with it for five minutes, whether or not they even touch the instrument. Because part of what's really important with practice is actually developing the habit. So if the habit isn't there, the practice challenge can really be helpful to just get that habit going.

Christine Goodner:

I agree. I think in a way I really love how you put that because thinking about where are we now and then how do we get level up in a way or get to the next level of practice for ourselves? And I couldn't agree more that just getting started and making the time for it in our schedule for our younger students or just even somebody who's gotten out of the habit of practice and it's gotten away from them, can be really powerful. So if that's you letting anything count, like you're saying, touching the instrument, keep the bar really low in that case so that you are just setting yourself up for success and to make that habit. And the other thing I was thinking of as we were getting ready to record is also I think sometimes it can feel tempting that our child has to be in a certain kind of mood when they practice, they're grumpy or we don't get along the whole time.

Should we really count that as practice? And I would argue, I would argue yes, if your practice is going well except you're arguing, then maybe it's fair to be like for this practice challenge, we're going to work on our relationship in the practice session. But in general, I would say sometimes I practice and I'm grumpy, but I still practice and it still counts. I maybe setting aside our mood from the task at hand is really helpful. It can feel hard to reward something when we're like, oh, they were so grumpy. But kind of beside the point I guess I would say

Barbie Wong:

That is a great point. I couldn't agree more. The purpose is to actually practice. So whether or not it's a happy practice or a grumpy or an angry practice, I would say they all count.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, it's fine to talk about boundaries and expectations and how are we going to treat each other. But yeah, I would definitely count it as a check mark for practice for sure. Well let's switch gears. There's a little background noise. I don't know if anybody can hear it. Somebody, they're leaf blowing my roof of all things today, so I apologize if you can hear it. Hopefully the audio will come through clearly. But what do you see as some of the benefits of a practice challenge? I know we've already mentioned it can help us establish a practice habit or maybe help us spend more time on our practice session if we realize maybe we want a longer practice, as you were saying earlier with extending our time. What else would you see as a benefit of a practice challenge?

Barbie Wong:

I think goals in general are very helpful to a lot of people just having a goal. So the practice challenge often is a set number of days. So if it's like a 30 day challenge, then there's just that goal, oh wow, how many days can I complete in these 30 days? And for some kids just saying, oh my goodness, maybe I will be able to practice 30 days in a row, gets them really fired up and that will inspire them to get through to the instruments every day.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I agree. I think it's Gretchen Rubin who is an author and she's a podcast, I think she has this quote where she says it's easier. The things you do every day are easier than the things you do once in a while or things you do all the time are easier than things you do sometimes. And I think in a way, a practice challenge, especially if we're trying to do a number of days in a row, it kind of helps us realize that. I've spoken to parents before who said their teacher implemented like a hundred day practice challenge and they thought it was such a drag at first and then partway through they realized they weren't fighting anymore with their child over getting started with practice. It was a given like, oh, I want to earn this

thing or have this end goal for myself. And they realized actually it was so much easier not to have random days off, even though I feel like we're being nice to our child to not help them practice. Sometimes it sort of sabotages getting in the routine piece of it.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, that's right. The momentum, when you build up momentum, it's great. Then you can just breathe the sigh of relief because you've put in the hard work and it just keeps going on its own. I would also mention that another great benefit is that you can really address different personality types. There are some kids that are actually quite competitive and so having a practice challenge can really get these kids fired up. Actually, one of my students, I was just having a parent class with a dad and he said, oh my kid's really competitive. And of course for me light bulb, alright, we're going to do a practice challenge and that's going to get him very excited.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. I think that's the case where if you're a family member, a parent, someone who's supporting a young musician in practice and you know that about your child, when Barbie just said that you think, oh my child too. Then creating your own family practice challenge could be really helpful. A hundred day practice challenge is a super popular thing in the music teacher world I think. But if that feels daunting, 30 days is great and I've seen it both 30 days in a row or even just when we get to 30 days, a certain reward's going to happen. And especially for those competitive students, I think that kicks things into gear of parents will tell me during the practice challenge in my studio, oh they wouldn't let me have them go to bed until we did something on their instrument and they weren't going to miss out on X number of days this week. So I think that can be so powerful.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I also think that especially if you're a teacher instituting a practice challenge just makes it easier for the parents. A lot of times parents can just say, well, there's this practice challenge. They can just point to an entity outside of themselves. Sometimes kids just they love their parents but they don't want to listen to them, but they will listen to the teacher or they will be like, oh, it's the practice challenge. That's why I have to practice.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, it reminds me when I have students that are in a school music class and there's a practice log they have to turn in school orchestra for example. I always love when that happens because they have to be accountable how many minutes that I practice this week, for example, to their school teacher. And it's sort of an extra layer of reinforcement that practice needs to happen. So I think the more reinforcements from different people we can get on that idea, the better. So I definitely agree. So just to recap so far, we want to define what counts as a practice. If you're doing a family challenge, maybe talk to your teacher what they would think for your child's level of what would be a good definition there if you're not sure where to start with that. And then we talked about some benefits. Do you have any examples, Barbie of practice challenges that you've used that have worked in your studio?

Barbie Wong:

I've done some practice challenges actually that have been tied to actually raising money for a cause and I think it was, I don't know what, there was some sort of, sadly some sort of disaster that happened recently and we were trying to raise money for the Red Cross. Yeah, so it was great because then the

students are like, oh well my grandma's going to pay me 10 cents for every day that I practice and so I'd like to practice more. I want to raise more money. So that's one way to make it so that's like it's going towards something good.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. That can be really powerful, especially for students who like to feel like they're contributing to something or like you're saying, doing good in the world. So kind of a practice. Aon, a lot of students where I live, there's a jog-a-thon at some point during their school year. So if you're family member who can kind of picture what that would be, finding sponsors for minutes of practice or hours of practice or whatever it is that can be great and coming up with a cause. And again, you could do that as a family. What's a cause the child's really interested in and do that. I'll share one that I think any idea I'm sharing. I'm sure I didn't come up with it, just seen it out in the world somewhere. So this is sort of collection of things. I'm not saying I invented it, but a paper chain practice challenge.

And I've seen this especially as a Suzuki teacher with review pieces and I did this one year over winter break. I handed out little pieces of paper and then for every review piece that the student played, they linked together one piece of paper into this paper chain and then brought back their chain with them to the studio so we could put it around the room after the break. And that was great. You could do that with one for each practice task or if you're trying to get to a certain number of days, just see those links build up. And it's one of those ways to have a tangible, just a visual way to see the progress that we're making. Sometimes we practice but it just feels endless and we don't see any results that we can kind of feel and see.

Barbie Wong:

I love that. I love that idea. I'm curious when you had that, did each person have their own color of strips of paper or was it just one collective big chain that you did?

Christine Goodner:

It was one collective big chain, but at home they got to see it build up because we had this couple weeks off. And then I think just seeing that their chain was part of a bigger community effort, just maybe similar to the fundraising idea, was really fun for them to see. I knew it wasn't just them doing it.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, that's great. I love that.

Christine Goodner:

Do you have any other ideas or any other practice challenges that you've used in your studio?

Barbie Wong:

I think I've just done mostly other things had to do with a hundred charts and having them fill that out. But nothing that I've actually labeled as a practice challenge per se.

Christine Goodner:

No, I think charts can be a really good way. Some students too are really into charts and seeing those check marks add up. So practice charts. I think if you even Googled a 30 day or a hundred day practice challenge charts, there's probably some that are just out there floating around that other people have

made. You don't have to come up with that year yourself. Another one that I've done in my studio that I definitely got from a colleague was I bought a big roll of raffle tickets and we did this fall actually, I started making it a sort of a tradition in the fall because that's when everyone's getting back in their practice routine. And so I had very clearly defined if you practice five days a week, you get one ticket. If you practice six or seven days a week, you get two tickets. And we wrote the student's name on the back of the tickets and put them in a jar. And then I had some bigger prizes that we pulled out at the end of the defined period of time.

And I've tried it from start of the semester for the first two months up to our fall recital and I think it's too long. People sort of peter out with that particular challenge. So if you try this, I found a month is a sweet spot for keeping students engaged with that. And I don't know about you Barbie, but when I do a studio y thing like this, I feel like there's always some people that just really aren't into it and they don't really engage with it. And I've just learned that that is fine. Everybody's doing it. It's optional. I don't scold anybody who's decided not to participate just maybe it's just too much or not their thing. But I think offering a lot of different ways to motivate our students throughout the year can be really helpful. So it catches some people that might not be motivated by other things.

Barbie Wong:

I love that you mentioned that because I actually used that idea this last year and what's interesting is we actually did it for several months and the students, my students seem to really like it. In fact, in the fall I decided to do something else and some of my students were like, where are the tickets? We need the tickets. They're so used to it.

Christine Goodner:

No, I definitely had a few students that were asking where the tickets were. I think everybody for me, in my studio in the fall, they got in the routine and then they were still doing the practice, but they just weren't remembering to track it to tell me how many days. And that part petered out the practice. He kind of did his job, I realized. And there's just a few diehards that were like, where's the tickets when that family went away? But yeah, I love that. I love that. Really fun to think about. So I think we could keep it very simple, simply boxes to check off and tally up the days. And then there's all sorts of different, more elaborate things we could do or have a cause to work towards or some kind of studio party at the end for participants. There's so many ways you could go with it, but I think the main thing is just kind of a big group effort where people see everyone's working on their practice and I think that could be really, really powerful. Any closing thoughts or closing words you'd want to leave listeners with about practice Challenge before we go?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I think that the intention is to encourage practice. So getting to know either what your child is into or your students, what will get them excited and not have to think too big. And sometimes also realize you just experiment. You try something, it might work, it might not work. And if it doesn't okay, now then you just move on and try something else.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly, exactly. Just like with anything with practice, I always say if it doesn't work, just cross it off your list. We don't need to feel guilty about anything. It's just like, okay, information that works for other people's studios are not mine or other people's families or other people's kids are not mine. And like you

said, the goal is just how do we get the practice to happen or how do we get more quality practice to happen if we have already got the routine going?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, that's right.

Christine Goodner:

All right, well thanks Barbie. Thanks for chatting about this with us. If you listen to this episode and have ideas you want to share about practice challenges that have worked for you, definitely reach out and let us know. Or if you try one of these ideas prompted by this conversation, we would love to hear about that too. Have a great week, everyone.

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