



## Episode 72: Creating an Environment for Your Young Musician to Thrive with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

Welcome to the Time to Practice podcast, where we talk all about the joy, discipline, creativity, and perseverance it takes to go into the practice room and make progress over the hours and years it takes to learn an instrument. My name's Christine Goodner. I'm excited to welcome guests who will share their creative process, practice tips, and what they learned the hard way. Let's get started. Welcome back everyone. I'm excited this month to be welcoming Barbie Wong, back to the podcast. Welcome Barbie.

Barbie Wong:

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Christine Goodner:

We always enjoy hearing from you and hearing your ideas and today especially, I thought of you when I was coming up with a topic. We're going to talk about creating a musical environment at home if we're the family of a music student. And I know this is a topic that you really are passionate about and you've done a lot of research on, and we acknowledged before we hit record, we could talk about this topic for hours, but we're going to give a little short and sweet taster to this idea about why it's important to think about the home environment. And if you're a teacher listening to this, maybe this is an episode you could share with the families in your studio if you think they would benefit from hearing it. So Barbie, I know you've done a lot of research on the lives of musicians and especially what their childhoods were like growing up and the origin story of a lot of musicians, and I just wondered, what are some of the things you've learned about home environments? A lot of the musicians we admire,

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, the musicians, we think about the ones that are adults that are making music and love it. Essentially what I have found that they have all in common aren't that they have musical parents per se, but that somehow in their environment they just heard a lot of music. And I think one of the best examples is Lin Manuel Miranda, who as we know wrote Hamilton and a bunch of other things that

everybody has just really knows about the music to Encanto, Moana and Manuel. His parents were not musicians. In fact, his mom has declared herself a terrible singer, and she says, professional singers or great singers will tell her, please don't sing near us. You throw us off key, because her singing is still terrible. I mean, she makes fun of herself, which I think is sweet. However, she and her husband played music around the house all the time, and in fact, she even sang the Manuel to Sleep every night with her terrible singing. She still expressed her love for her child through music. So I think something of that sort gives a lot of inspiration to parents who are not musical. And so I would say do as much as you can to bring music into the house like Lynn, my mom's parents, because that makes the biggest difference.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. And I love an example where the parents aren't necessarily musicians because I hear from a lot of families that maybe are starting lessons or in a workshop who worry since I'm not a musician, can I support my child in this endeavor? And absolutely. But I do think the environment that our kids are surrounded with makes a huge difference. So just knowing how can we cultivate that for them, whether we're a musician or not, is really, really important to think about. So we want to share with you who are listening some ideas that maybe we would share with our own studio families about how to create a musical environment at home. And the first thing I thought of was going to live concerts and seeing live music performed. And even now for myself that I just really feel motivated and just want to go home and practice when I see a really inspiring or wonderful concert.

It could be classical music, it might not be, but just seeing fabulous music. There's something about being in the room with just the, I don't know, the vibrations of the notes. And it's just so different than only watching on video, which is also valuable. And I would say do that as well. But seeing live music can be so motivating for every one of all ages. But I think especially for students to see what's possible to want to put in the work, to learn their instrument. And there can be a barrier like cost barrier sometimes, but there's probably local schools that have free concerts, community orchestras. The Oregon Symphony where I live does a number of concerts in local libraries and community centers. You have to do a little digging in the investigative work sometimes to find those. But there hopefully is in your community some opportunities to see live music at a reduced cost or even for free if you look for those opportunities. So I can't recommend doing that enough. How about you Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

So I totally agree with that. And I guess I want to add to that, that sometimes the live music could simply be your child's friend's music recital. A lot of times kids, they want to copy what they see, but if they see their friend playing music at a recital, then they're more likely to say, oh, really? They do that? Oh, okay, I want to do that too. And of course that's totally low cost and very easy to access. Some other ideas that I think are really helpful. I think about my dad. My parents are not musicians, so that's also another good example of a musician coming from non-musicians. But my dad loved music and I remember when I was young, he would play the Beatles and he would get the biggest smile on his face. And I really think that I developed a love for music from looking at him and seeing his love. And so I think it's great for parents to play the music that they love because it's for kids to hear the kind of music that they're playing on their instruments, but they really, I mean, they see parents as role models and they really want to copy what parents are doing. So play the music you love, share with them why you love it. You can say, oh my God, I love the singer, or I remember this concert I went to when I saw so-and-so, and they're just going to feed off that enthusiasm.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's really, really important. And like you say, all different kinds of music. I grew up with, my dad was a musician, he played the clarinet and he was getting a doctorate in conducting when I was young, but I grew up with his Hoka band practicing in the living room downstairs. And that is not a type of music that I play or even I'm particularly drawn to in general, but just seeing live music happening. I remember lining up all my stuffed animals on this little landing we had by the steps coming downstairs, and we were all the audience watching them rehearse. And I think growing up in that environment helped me see too that music was an exciting thing that people enjoyed being a part of. And so I think also just there could be open rehearsals, whether it's you as the parent or like you're saying a friend or a school group or anything like that. But just watching musicians like that and seeing people impacted by music in various ways and bringing them joy, whether that's listening or producing the music, I think is so powerful. So love that. Love that.

I think another one on my list was just being encouraging and the more encouragement we can give that we see our child either putting in a lot of effort or growing sometimes just being like, oh, I see how hard you're working. Or, oh wow, remember how that used to challenge you and now look what you're doing. Or when we play a concert, it can be tempting to be that Boeing wasn't perfect and we practiced it every day, but I think if we could focus and sit on what we see that's going well and that it brings us joy, pride, whatever it is to see our children perform, I think that can be really helpful as well. Being in an environment full of encouragement, it's very easy as musicians to pick apart everything we do. And I think there's plenty of that just because we go to lessons and hear our flaws. But the more family members, whether it's grandparents, whoever can just encourage the child making the music, whatever that looks and sounds like at the given moment, I think that's a really powerful way to have a musical environment too.

Barbie Wong:

I highly agree with that. And that's actually where I went wrong with my first child because I was too critical. And very soon after that, she just stopped wanting to play the piano when we ended up finding her a cello teacher and things turned around. But when my second kid came around, I went totally in the encouraging realm and it was great. I was actually able to teach my own child for 11 years through just being highly, highly encouraging. It doesn't come naturally to a lot of people, I have to say. I mean, I didn't grow up with that. So I think knowing, oh my goodness, by saying this, it feels awkward. But through practice as with anything, I got better and better. And now I can hear my child play. I can still spot all the mistakes, but I can point out, oh my goodness, your tempo is really steady. And I focus on that, and then I let my child's teacher take care of the other stuff.

Christine Goodner:

Thank you for sharing that. I think a lot of people can relate to that story in, I think especially when we're musicians ourselves practicing with our own children. A lot of people tell me, and I know I also struggled with that, I had to really sit on what I was going to say before it came out of my mouth. But when we're musicians ourselves, we see the imperfections and it's really hard not to articulate them. But I think if we zoom back and realize in a bigger picture, we're trying to create this environment where a love of music and enjoyment of music and culture of music lives in the house. We don't want it to be a culture of criticism, for example, if we can help it, and it's okay not to be perfect at it, but I think working on it and kind of acknowledging that that's going to be powerful for our child and also maybe it's hard for us is really key.

Barbie Wong:

Yep, exactly. I think another thing to think about too is a musical environment. Yes, it's so important. And eventually kids are going to grow into teenagers and then after teenagers, adults, and if you think about their development when they're teens, they're going to want to take their cues from their friends more and more than the parents. So I would really think about what is a nice path for them to take in terms of making music with other people. So as much as possible, try to get your child into group music, making activities, whether it's group classes or ensembles like band orchestra, be something where they can interact with other kids. That kind of musical environment is priceless.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, that was going to be my next tip, as well as just opportunities to make music with other people. And whether that's a summer camp or institute, if you're a Suzuki family, participation in school, school ensembles, if you're a place of worship, if you have a way to share your music, there's so many ways that students can do that and find that. But I think if we're just practicing alone in our room as teenagers, something's missing there. A lot of students will not keep going without that social outlet for music. That's what kept me going through my teen years a hundred percent. So

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, same here. I really think that the reason why I'm here today as a musician is because I went to summer camp and because my teacher had group lessons, which then allowed me to see my friends every week, and that was just so much fun

Christine Goodner:

For me. It was orchestra, definitely community, orchestra, school, orchestra, all of those are really powerful. And the friends I had, sometimes I would be like, I don't want to practice, but I want to see my friends, so I'm going to do it so I can go. And I think in a way we're thinking about if we're, if we can picture the home environment as the musical environment when our children are really young and we have a lot of influence over that as the family, but then like you're saying, as we get to the teen years, where can we get our child involved? So that carries on with their peer group. And I think that's a really important role actually as a family member is just where can I get them involved?

Barbie Wong:

And then also as a piano teacher, it's not as easy to just fit 10 pianos into one room to have a group lesson. But this year I actually decided, because I believe groups are still important, I just instituted a weekly group lesson that my students have to attend. And I have two keyboards, and sometimes we'll play together, but we do a lot of different things. And I just think if you're a teacher, just really think about making that a priority because you're going to do such a great service to the parents. When parents see kids having fun together, I mean, that's priceless. And then when they go back home and they have to do practice, it's going to be so much easier for the kids,

Christine Goodner:

Right? And you can team up with other teachers in your community and find creative ways to not feel like it's all on you to make that happen. But yeah, I think getting kids opportunities to interact with each other through their music really is going to be helpful to keep them playing and keep them surrounded by music even when they're off from home doing lots of activities. And I always found with my own children that just a group of kids they interacted with and having that peer group for them that was

involved with music was just a really nice place for them to be. It was really supportive for them socially as well as musically. So that's always reassuring as a parent and family member too.

Barbie Wong:

Oh yeah, I agree.

Christine Goodner:

Any other closing thoughts you want to think about when we're sharing the idea of a musical environment?

Barbie Wong:

I would say if you're a parent and there's not music playing in your house every day, make that your first priority. And maybe if you don't have the habit yet, just set an alarm so that, oh, my kid gets off at school at this time. Or maybe at dinner every night you put on music. Well, I think one family told me that they would do theme dinners and then if they had Italian food, they would put on Italian music for that theme. So anyway, there's many fun ways, but really just get the music started so that it's really surrounding the child.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. Yeah, it makes for some fun memories as a family as well. And I think the idea, just to piggyback on that, of habit stacking that I've heard referred to a lot in the personal development space, but if you link up your listening habit to something else, like you're saying dinner or for some people it's during breakfast or while we're getting pajamas on or falling asleep or whatever it is, just having times of day you listen to music can be really great. If it's on our long to-do list, it can fall off easily in my experience. But creating that, it feels separate from motivation and the practice sessions we might do on our instrument, but it's so linked up and they kind of feed each other. So some food for thought. How to get that started for yourself this week if you haven't yet. I love that. Well, thanks again for being here, Barbie, and sharing your thoughts with us. We hope it prompted some creative ideas for you who are listening.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, thank you so much. I loved being here, and I am very excited to hear what our listeners are going to do and try and I hope to hear all the fun things that happened with them.

Christine Goodner:

Before we go today, here are a few of the takeaways from my conversation with Barbie Wong about creating a musical environment. And I'll just recap a few of them for you that I think I hope you'll take with you into the week ahead and think about how does this work out for your family and how do you incorporate these? Or if you're a music educator, how could we help spread the word about some of these or talk about these more with our students? So the first is to look for opportunities in your community to see live music. And I loved Barbie's suggestion about even going to your child's friends recitals. There's live music, and sometimes seeing our friends do something is super inspiring. So I especially love that tip.

Share music that you love with your child, and I think seeing us light up as adults, I couldn't agree more with what Barbie said about that. Seeing us light up as adults are about the music that we are listening

to and that we love, and sharing that with our children is such a great way to get them inspired and interested in music themselves. Give encouragement, create an environment with lots of encouragement, and think about airing on the side of letting the teacher do the critical comments and the corrective comments at just making sure our children know that we're their biggest fans and we're excited about what they're doing and we see their hard work can be really, really important. Having opportunities for our child to make music with other people in other groups with their peers, thinking about how do we get a social aspect to practice, especially as our children get into the tween and teen years and their social environment is such an important piece of their enjoyment in music and their social lives. I think that we can look for ways to get them involved with other people making music. And then finally listening. I loved the idea of themed dinner with food and music in the style that matches that thinking about pairing up our listening with a certain time of day or habit stacking as we talked about in this conversation. Those can all be great ways to think about getting more listening into our child's environment and creating that musical environment at home that helps feed motivation and interest in music in our child.

Would love to hear what you took away from this episode, or if you tried any of our ideas today, or they even just reminded you of something you haven't tried in a while, that can be really helpful. You can reach me by email, [christine@suzukitriangle.com](mailto:christine@suzukitriangle.com) or through Instagram at Suzuki Triangle, and we would love to hear from you. Also, Barbie and I have conversations on regularly with our community and the musical Nest community. I'll put a link to that in our show notes. You're always invited to come join us. We have monthly community meetings where we discuss topics like this, and we want to create a space for people to share ideas with each other and get inspired. So that is always something you're invited to join us in as well. All right, time to Practice community. I hope you have a great week incorporating music into your daily life and happy practicing everyone.

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