



Episode 76: How can I get my child to WANT to practice without being reminded? A discussion with Christine Goodner & Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

All right, well, welcome everyone. I'm excited to have back on the podcast our frequent guest, Barbie Wong. It's always a pleasure to talk to you, Barbie and share ideas. I'm really looking forward to speaking to you today.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, I love being here. Thank you for having me.

Christine Goodner:

Well, there's so many things we could talk about, but I thought maybe for the next few times we meet, we could talk about some frequently asked questions that I know I get when I talk to families and parents supporting music students, and I would imagine you hear something similar sometimes. So our topic for this month's podcast is a question I hear often, which is, how do you get kids to want . . . And I took this from a card that a parent filled out in a class I taught and want was all in caps . . . to practice without being reminded. So how do we get kids to want to practice without being reminded? And I will just preface this by saying, I know I personally had to be reminded to practice all through high school, not because I didn't want to play my instrument, but because I was sort of bad at managing my time and switching from task to task or looking at like, oh, if I don't start now, I won't have time before I have to go to bed. And so I think there's so many factors besides it being about motivation on the instrument. And some students will need it for a long time for reasons that have nothing to do with loving music or their instrument specifically. So I don't want to kick things off with that thought. What is your initial thoughts, Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

Well, I feel like that question is a double doozy because you have the, I want my child to want to practice and then not be reminded. And so if we break those up, I think about how hard it is. And similar to me, I did not want to practice for most of my childhood, and I see that with most of the students that

I have. And it is totally normal for kids to not want to practice. So nothing is wrong if somehow you're like, oh my God, if my child doesn't want to practice, maybe they shouldn't play this instrument. No, don't go there, then nobody would play any instruments. So we need to think about that as, okay, this is something that it can take some time for kids to build up the wanting to practice. And then also, as you were talking about just other things, other factors that might come into play, maybe a lot of kids are just not thinking about practice or other things are distracting them. So that's my initial thoughts on that. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Yes. I gave a talk yesterday to a group and I shared an analogy that I share a lot and maybe I've shared on this podcast before, which is that I think practice is to music, like running is to sports. And there are people whose whole sport is running and they love to run and they're on track and field or do distance running and they love it. And there's other people like soccer player, Abby I heard interviewed a few years back who said she hated running, but she put in her miles because she wanted to be a world-class soccer player and she knew she wanted the end result from it. And so I think we could take that idea from sports and apply to music. Some people love to practice. I have a student right now, the family made a no practice before 5:30 AM rule because she was waking them up, but that's one student out of my whole fairly large studio.

It's pretty rare. But other students, they want the result. They want to perform, they want to see their friends, they like the music they're playing, but the actual discipline work of practice, they're like, oh, I wish I didn't have this part wasn't involved. And I think like you're saying, it's all so normal and there's such a spectrum, and I think if we were music students as kids who didn't have to be told to practice, it can be confusing if our kids suddenly aren't doing that as well. It's like something's wrong here. And so I think to me it's that taking away the piece of what's wrong or does this mean we're not cut out for this? But if we can leave people with nothing else, knowing that today would be great.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I totally agree. And thinking back to my interview, I had interviewed this Steinway artist who's also a Grammy nominated pianist Daniel, and he talks about how when he practiced when he was younger, he just really didn't like it that much. There were times and he didn't really practice as much as you would expect. Somebody of his caliber would be practicing when he was younger. I think he actually said he was practicing maybe up to three hours a day, which seems like really nothing when it's classical piano. But at the same time, he's like, well, I kind of did what I needed to do to get where I wanted to go. And so even today, he's actually also a professor of piano at Notre Dame, and he's like, yeah, it's not my favorite thing to do, but I will do it.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, I have had similar interviews. I think it's really a healthy perspective to kind of demystify the fact that, like you said, there's two things here that will our children need to be reminded and will they want to do the practice. So that gives people an idea about what we would like them to take away on that topic, but say we want to help inspire more motivation to practice or more things that help our child get to their instrument with less nagging from us as the parent or family at home. Maybe we could share some ideas with listeners about some ideas for that. And the first one that comes to mind to me is something that we did together in our community that we have together Barbie, which is having a practice challenge. And I think if we know there's a certain number of days of practice we're working towards and it's something outside of ourselves, but we're excited to participate, that can be like, oh,

well, I can't skip today because I'm part of this thing that's going on and that's going to make me sit down in my instrument or pick up my instrument.

That was the first thing I thought of is just how do we inspire more motivation coming from our child?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, definitely. Oh, practice challenges are so good. I loved the practice challenge we did because one of our members was saying, I no longer feel like a musical hermit. And that's what happens when you practice. You have to, in essence, be by yourself. You can't practice with somebody else because by the nature of music and sound, you can't hear yourself clearly if somebody else is making music as well. So you have to be alone. But then these practice challenges then make it easier. And I actually just started this other practice challenge inspired by one of our members, Tammy Melton. She got these pill containers, the ones that are basically to remind you to take a pill each day, those plastic ones to get at the drugstore. And basically she said she put a piece of candy in each one for each of her students, and whenever they're done with a practice, they get to pop one out and eat it. And it was amazing. It was like meeting frenzy when I showed this to my students, they were like, yes. Oh my God. The amount of excitement around just a piece, it was like a Skittle or an Eminem, but they were so excited. So little things like that, primes are okay. I think rights are totally fine. Just keep it in perspective and figure out what works for the child that you're working

Christine Goodner:

With. Yes, I love that. And maybe I have shared this with you before, but I recently was talking to somebody on this topic and they said they knew a college professor friend who gives themselves a piece of candy after each essay that they grade because it's just like they have to power themselves through. And I loved hearing that. It just helped us remember, helped me remember it's not just kids that need that, okay, I'm going to get this done kind of motivation in silly ways if we need it.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, yeah, external motivation is totally fine. Most of us need that in some way.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, yes. Well, any other ideas that you've had about how to think about getting students to their instruments, getting motivated to play?

Barbie Wong:

Well, just making sure that there's a whole practice routine set up so that it's not this question of whether the child will practice, but oh, we've already figured out on Tuesdays. Then you might have soccer right after school, but then right before dinner, there's that time to practice. So it's just getting each day set up so that what's going to happen. And if you're a teacher thinking about, oh, how do I work with the families to communicate that, and then maybe part of the lesson is talking to the parent and say, let's set this up so that your child can be successful when they get back home. And then helping the parents realize, oh, once the child practices, they get better. They make progress and they actually then become more motivated to play because they see their progress.

Christine Goodner:

That's so true. There is a cycle that motivation comes from seeing ourselves make that progress and having that routine set up is really good because out of nowhere, we're not going to probably most of us think like, oh, I'm not sure what to do right now. I think I'll practice. But if it's like, oh, every time I come home from soccer, that's when I practice. So they get home, they have their snack, and they're like, okay, I'm used to this being now my time to get started. That can help. We all, those of us who have been parents, our parents would love to stop nagging our children to do any number of things. And so anything we can do to make that easier, a routine is really key. I was also thinking that having things to practice for a practice challenge could be one of them, but if there's a recital coming up, my students, we just had a workshop in the studio and they're playing a piece for a guest clinician and just knowing there's something where we're going to perform or share our music with somebody. Having those can be a really great way to get us motivated to get going or want to practice. Maybe we don't want to do the actual work of practice, but we want to have the end result and so we will practice. So that's another thing that comes to mind for me. Oh

Barbie Wong:

Yeah. Oh yeah. Recitals are great. I recommend at the very, very least two recitals a year for a music studio if you can do more. I mean, if you can do monthly recitals, I've heard some people will do more informal recitals, and that gets students really excited and more motivated to practice,

Christine Goodner:

And if you see your particular child could benefit from more performances than you're seeing scheduled in the studio, then it's like, we're going to play for the grandparents on FaceTime. We're going to go play outside of the farmer's market if they allow that kind of thing. I think we can also, as families manufacture little mini informal, like you're saying, performance opportunities as well. If we're feeling like, oh, this is the one thing that gets my child going in the practice room.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, exactly. I had my kids play at the local retirement home, which is one of the best places for kids to perform because the audience is so kind. They're just so happy to see you there, and they just clap and they're just so excited. I would say retirement homes and then places of worship, the church or the temple, if there are opportunities, again, people are just so excited that you're making music and will support you.

Christine Goodner:

I do think any place you can play for people beyond just your family, it's wonderful to have our family cheer us on, but I think we can all take for granted like, oh, all these children are playing violin. But people in the public, I feel like sometimes we play it at the grocery store around the holidays as part of a fundraiser and just people are surprised to see students play music at a high level, I think, and you can get a very enthusiastic response that feels very invigorating, I think, to play in front of different audiences. Yeah, those are good.

Barbie Wong:

I guess what I'm thinking about is, well, I am thinking about the latter part of that question about being reminded, and I think it's okay, as you were talking about as a teenager, to still be reminded and I think give teenagers a break a little bit. I mean, of course, I actually currently have two teenagers, so I understand the ups and downs, and sometimes I think about, I feel like sometimes the teenagers have

so much going on, and there's different ways. I have a teen who was not practicing or I had forgotten to practice, and it was sort of this dance, and at some point I realized, oh, I'm just going to go to my teen and say, oh, I love how you remember things. Well, it was just a very playful dialogue. I was like, oh, oh, I'm sure you're listening to this music of the piece that you're learning, and my team's like, yeah, yeah. I'm like, oh. And it's great that you plan out the day that you've decided that in a few hours you're probably going to be practicing your instrument, right? Oh, yes. I've planned out the whole day. Anyway, we had this sort of fun little dialogue, and of course that prompted them to practice, so it wasn't like, oh, you forgot and bringing stress, but it was this fun thing where I knew my kid would respond very kindly to sort of this play acting thing that we had.

Christine Goodner:

I love that. Yes. And I think positivity always can go far in helping a very positive, like you're saying, playful reminder where if we scold them, our kids about practice or make them feel like they need to rebel against us telling them what they must do, that's very different than in a way you were sort of saying, I believe in you that you can make this happen as along with being playful. I like that. One other thought that came to mind for me was just having some piece of music that a student loves to play, and it could be something I assigned them as their teacher, part of their curriculum for working with me. Or it could be people will come with video game music and I may or may not even see it ever in the lesson, but I think it's something families or parents could do is just ask their child, what do you really hope you could play on your instrument?

Not for your teacher, just for you? Because if there's something where they're like, well, I just want to get my instrument out, or I just want to set up my instrument to play that one thing, it's often the beginning of practice and getting started that is the hardest for people, and once they get going, it's okay. And so just having something that makes them play their instrument just for the love of it, I think is important for so many reasons. But I think it can help us see that result of like, oh, they're just going to play the piece that they're interested in. We want to make sure there is a piece that they love to play, not just, I have a bunch of assignments I should do. That could be like, why doesn't my book, my child read books for fun? But the only thing that they can think of to read are serious literature for English class. Some students will love that, and others need something that's just like, oh, well, I just want to see what happens next in this. It's silly mystery I'm reading or whatever.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, that's really true. Having something that they're excited about because then you have to think about the big picture too, and what exactly do we want our children, our students to be able to do after they leave music lessons? I mean, we want them to be able to choose music and to have this investment in that. So I think letting them choose when they're young, you don't have to let them choose every single piece, but having something that they're excited about. Then they build this relationship with music where they're like, oh yeah, music, I get to choose what I want to play. And that's how they relate to music as they grow older.

Christine Goodner:

I think when we can feel like, oh, music is for me because it makes me feel a certain way or because I just find it delightful in some way. I agree with you. I always want to make sure my students that are past the preschool just beginner stage, but that they have one piece at least where they're just love playing it and can't wait to play it on their instrument. I think that goes really far in prompting us to start to want to play with more motivation of our own rather than our parents telling us we must. And I guess

I'll cap off. We could probably talk about this all day, Barbie, but I think I'll cap off this conversation and say, if you're a parent or family member who is the one prompting your child to practice and feeling a little exhausted by the fact that you feel like you're carrying the mental load of getting practice started, we also understand and hear you that that takes a lot of patience and commitment and perseverance, and you can feel like, well, I wanted my child to learn this instrument.

I didn't want to create a new job for myself to remind them every day to practice. And we hear you on that. And I think just having that simple reminder and knowing that we'll go really far to get your child on their musical journey. And even if they don't tell you, I think they will Thank you. Later. We hear people, I'm sure you do too, Barbie when I tell them what I do for a job, but they're like, why did my parents let me quit? And I think it's sometimes things like this that really wear on us as parents that make us feel like, do I want to keep reminding them forever? So we want to encourage you that we do understand it's frustrating. We would just want to let you know that we hear that, and we've probably experienced that, and that's very valid. And these are just some ideas that I can't react that.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah. Oh yeah. I mean, I would say just this last year, there were times when even I felt like my kids are teens. They should have been for me. I had these shit thoughts. Oh, they should already be doing all these things. And at some point I got so frustrated I'm like, oh, maybe I should just let them quit. This is so hard. And of course, I eventually got through that, but I can really understand many times that I'm like, it would just be easier to just let them quit. But I know too in the future, my kids are going to come back and be like, oh, thank you so much for that. It just won't be today, and it probably won't be for the next few years or maybe even the next decade.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, yes. But we both hear, and I'm sure if you're a music teacher, you hear it too, how many people quit around in their early teens and just wonder why their even let them do that? And we can imagine all the reasons why his parents, unless you're sharing, I'm glad you shared that story, but I think it's one of those things that's hard, but worth it. And if for a child's fighting with us, that's a different thing, but just that reminder is so powerful. So we want to thank you if you're a parent or family member putting in that work to do that, investing in your child's music journey that way. It's really important. Any final thoughts you want to share before we go Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I think the frustration that comes with trying to get kids to practice and helping them advance or progress to the next level, that's just so hard to do alone. So I guess that's another reason why I love our musical nest community. And I just think that even if you don't join us, I hope that if you're a parent, you'll go and find other parents to talk to. If you're a teacher, go find other teachers to talk to because getting other people to just hear you and say, oh, yeah, I've been there too. It makes a world of difference.

Christine Goodner:

It does. It's such a relief. I see people have big exhales when they realize this is just all so normal and it's normal, and there's our strategies that can help us hopefully. So hopefully we've offered you a few of those today and we appreciate you all listening and can't wait to hear what you took away or tried or thought about after hearing this episode. Thanks so much, Barbie for joining me.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, thank you so much.

Christine Goodner:

Before we go today, here are a few takeaways from this conversation. I think first of all, just knowing there's so many factors why our student might need to be reminded about practice that does not really have anything to do with motivation or liking to play their instrument is really important to keep in mind. And also thinking about it can take time to build up that wanting to practice for a lot of students. And often it comes from things to practice for or elements in our environment that are motivating to practice for that will start to spark that for students. So research shows that motivation can be built from some of these ingredients and a few things that we mentioned today that we want to make sure stick with you. One is having a practice challenge. And if your studio is having a practice challenge, get on board and participate if you can.

Also, you can come up with your own practice challenge at home within your family, and that little bit of motivation or incentive can really help a student get going and build the habit of practice. I love how Barbie talked about having a practice routine and that routine and flow of practice in our daily lives can really help make progress on our instrument, which can lead to further motivation and help get the practice done. And then also, we talked about having something to practice for, whether it's a concert, community performance, mini concert for family. All of these things can really help students also to feel like there's a why behind their practice. And it's something that we can do as a family, think about what are ways we can perform beyond what's scheduled in our studio if we know that that really helps our students stay motivated.

So we hope this gives you a little bit of food for thought. And I think one way we can support our own children in their music journey is just looking for these ways to support their drive, to practice their interest and practice. And we want to just say to you, families supporting the young musicians in your lives that you're doing an important job. We know it's not always easy, but it will pay off in the long run to support our children through this journey in music. It's such a gift for students to have music in their lives, so thank you for all you do. We want to close off today by inviting you to join Barbie and I and our musical Nest community. If you're looking for a community like this, we have a community online but not on social media, and we have a unit on including games in music practice coming up later this month.

Would invite you to check it out at barbiewong.com/community. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And then also on Friday, April 11th, I'm hosting a workshop for teachers online and we're going to talk about holding parent teacher conferences in the studio. And so I'll be talking through a few formats that people use to hold them some questions and topics of discussion. And we'll also talk about how to follow up on any takeaways we have from those conferences with our students. So if you've ever thought about doing conferences but haven't taken that plunge yet, I invite you to join me on Friday, April 11th at 9:00 AM Pacific. I'd love to chat with you about that. We'll have some time for discussion and questions there as well. All right, time to practice community. Thanks for being here this week. We hope this has given you some ideas about music practice to take you into the week ahead. Thanks for all you do to support music and the lives of the young people. Take good care.

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