



## Episode 97: Barbie Wong - How to Establish or (Re-Establish) a Practice Routine for Kids

### Links in this Episode:

Christine Goodner ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to the Time to Practice podcast. This is a space where we talk about music practice, the ups and downs that young musicians go through related to practice and learning music, and how we as parents, caregivers, and music educators can support the young musicians in our lives, support ourselves and support each other. My name is Christine Goodner. I'm a music educator, author and podcaster who has made it my mission to talk about music practice and to support educators and families looking to make home practice more effective and to reduce conflict and frustration in the practice room. I'm so glad you're here.

([00:41](#)):

This episode is brought to you by my upcoming enrichment course for music teachers called Setting Families Up for Success, new Student Orientation and ongoing Support Systems for the studio teacher. This is a 10 hour enrichment course through the Suzuki Association of the Americas, and it's offered through the Oregon Suzuki Institute. We will meet online four Fridays in October, and I'd love to have you join me. You can read more information about it and register in the show notes. There'll be some details how to do that, and also you can look up this course on the SA website. All right, well, welcome everyone. I am excited to welcome back to the podcast today, Barbie Wong, who, if you're a frequent listener to this podcast, Barbie comes and speaks with us very often about topics related to practice. It's

always a pleasure to speak with her. So Barbie, thank you for being here again, this school year. Chat with us.

Barbie Wong ([01:38](#)):

Oh, it's great to be here. Christine

Christine Goodner ([01:41](#)):

And I can link in the show notes and the blog post that goes along with this conversation. Some of the past episodes where Barbie has been a guest, but I wonder for people who have never heard from you or met you before Barbie, could you share a little bit about what do you do in the world of music and your background as well?

Barbie Wong ([01:57](#)):

Yeah, I try to solve the problem of kids who don't want to practice, and it's something that comes up a lot for music teachers and parents who are raising musical kids. And it's basically a topic that has stumped so many people and stumped me when my kids were young. And so I wanted to really focus on that. And I have a classical piano background. I have two degrees in music. And then I would say because I was both a parent and a teacher, I realized that the parent's job is in some ways a lot harder and really wanted to support parents on this journey of raising musical kids.

Christine Goodner ([02:39](#)):

Yes, yes. I love that. I love that. I think we both connected because we both feel really passionate how much support parents need. If you're a parent listening to this, practicing with your kid or a grandparent or another practice support person, we know you have not an easy job. It's a big commitment, but it's also so important and so worth it. So hats off to you for doing that work because we're recording this in September fall. It's back to school where we are. I am kind of talking a lot this month with people about back to school routines or practice routines, and I wondered if you see any common themes when establishing a practice routine. It doesn't have to be back to school, could just be starting lessons in the first place, but what challenges do you see that people have with practice routines as families specifically I would say supporting their kids at home?

Barbie Wong ([03:28](#)):

Well, I think what tends to happen, especially when lessons are beginning, there's this excitement and a lot of times the practice can start off great. The kids are excited, it's a new thing. They're thinking about all the things they want to do, and it's sort of a honeymoon period. Eventually practice gets hard and practice by the way is supposed to be hard, but kids often don't know that. Parents don't realize that, and sometimes teachers forget to talk to parents about that. And when the practice gets hard, then it's almost like, oh, wait, what's happening? What are we doing? Are we doing something wrong? I think is what often happens to a lot of parents when they're thinking about practice. And actually there's

nothing wrong. Practice is supposed to be hard, but there is a way to make it easier. There's a way to ease the child into practice and also a way to make it so that it becomes much easier in the long run.

[\(04:29\)](#):

What I'm talking about is creating a practice routine. And I think we all know this, once you do something regularly, you don't have to think about it as much. This is with anything else. If you think about when you first started to drive, it was really hard in the beginning you had to think about every single action, but after some time you don't have to think about it. It becomes easier. And that's the same with practice. And it's really just getting to the instrument and doing it that I'm talking about. And a lot of kids are not capable of remembering to practice. I mean, Christine, you have some great ideas in your book, the Music Practice Makeover on how the different parts of practice and how to dive into those. And I would say the first part that parents really should pay attention to is just getting the child to the instrument.

[\(05:20\)](#):

Children will not normally get themselves to their instrument, and so it's really on the parents and it is a tough job, I have to say, supporting a young musician. But if you can get the child to the instrument consistently, ideally every day, but of course maybe you're busy or sometimes there are some off days, it's okay to take days off here and there, but getting the child there consistently means that they eventually build that habit and you build that habit and then after some time it just starts going pretty smoothly. You don't have to think about it, but in the beginning it is hard building that habit. So just realize that and realize that once that habit begins to go on its pace, the child actually then improves. If a child practices, they will improve and with improvement comes progress and joy and confidence. And then they will see, oh, I'm actually good at this.

[\(06:24\)](#):

And children who see that they're good at something will want to do it more. So it's a cycle that builds on itself. And think about practice like growing a plant. You can't just water a whole gallon into a plant once a week or once every two weeks or once a month and expect it to grow. You need to give it a little bit of water every day or every other day, and then it will slowly grow. But with a little bit of attention each day and even five minutes, I would say if your child's not practicing every day, five minutes might be all that can happen. Build on that five minutes, it will eventually get better

Christine Goodner [\(07:09\)](#):

Pieces of advice in there. And I think a lot of people tell me that if they get their child started, it's like the starting, that's the hardest part, which you alluded to earlier. And that once their child's going along, then it gets easier. It's that starting point that can feel like the real frustrating, stressful part for a lot of people. And I think even for myself, I don't fight it. I probably did as a child getting started, but I still have this mental sort of struggle with myself sometimes to transition from whatever I was doing or something

else that sounds easier or more appealing or less, it's going to require less focus or potential frustration for me than practice. Even now, just getting started, I think that part gets easier too. Like, oh, I always feel like this and it always feels better, but kids haven't learned that that's true yet. And so it's only natural that we hear and see extra resistance from them when they're getting started.

Barbie Wong ([08:03](#)):

Getting started is one of the hardest things, and that's why if you can do things that are helpful, setting things up, one of the things that I think is hard is when kids need a transition. So making sure that before music practice begins, you just say, oh, in 15 minutes we're going to start practice. So giving them this sense of, okay, it's coming and I still have time to play. And then perhaps your child needs a 10 minute warning, a five minute warning, a one minute warning, whatever it is, your child better. And if you can do that, it can help ease the child into practice. And of course, don't ask the child if they want to practice, just indicate it will be time to practice in 15 minutes. I have made that mistake, by the way, and all of these things that I say, I basically have bumbled and done really badly with my own children.

([08:58](#)):

So that's why, by the way, if practice isn't going well for that, you're in good company. And because I felt such pain, I wanted to figure out the solutions. And so that's why I'm sharing the advice. It doesn't come from a place of, I've done everything perfectly. It actually comes to a place of, wow, this is hard and painful. How do we make it better? And so having a transition can be really nice. And then also letting the child play what they want to play once they get to their instrument as the first thing can be a really nice thing some kids want to mess around. I'd say let them have that first minute, two minutes, five minutes, and then after that, then you can get into the practice.

Christine Goodner ([09:42](#)):

I do think having a chance to play more unstructured or less dictated by someone else noodle around whatever you want to call it, can be really, really motivating for students. And if you're listening to this, some parents tell me they have to save that for the end as sort of dessert of practice. They can't get their child to stop and get into the other activities. Or maybe you have other suggestions too, like set a timer and say, for this many minutes, you're going to get to do what you want and then we can transition into the assignment from your teacher. But I think that giving them a chance to play because we want them to enjoy it, of course. But then the enjoyable part might not be the structured homework from the teacher.

Barbie Wong ([10:17](#)):

Yeah, exactly. There's a difference between playing and practicing and practice is the hard part. Playing is the letting the child do what they want. And actually this idea comes from you, Christine, to use sand timers. Sand timers are great. The kids can just flip them over. And I tend to have a one minute and a two minute sand timer that the kids can use. And I have some students that this is now, when they come to

lesson, they know for the very first minute they flip that timer over and they get to play whatever they want. And so these students really need to ease into the lesson time. One minute's not very long, but a lot of times it's enough for them to say, oh, okay, I get to do what I want now. And then it allows their brains, I think someone somewhat to relax. This is my theory. I'm sure some neuroscience can talk about this, but it allows them to essentially, it seems like they relax and then they can pay attention after that.

Christine Goodner ([11:16](#)):

Yeah, I call it getting our brain in music mode because our brain can be full of many other things from the school day, from the car ride, from we were just looking at something, listening to something, thinking about something. And there is that little transition period, whatever that is for our kids, I think. Yeah, I like that idea to help kids get started. Great advice. Any other tips that you have for supporting the practice routine? Maybe especially getting started, because I think if we have a time of day two practice and we have guidance from our teacher what to practice, it can often just be like, how do we get this done and get us ourselves started? This is the parent that we need help with. And you, I'm so glad you said what you said Barbie, about how you're only sharing this because you struggled through it because that's a hundred percent my case as well. This felt so hard and I felt like nobody talked to me about that when I started practicing with my own kids. And I was so baffled why we were having struggles with practice the way we were. So it's also what motivates me and why I think it's really important that we have conversations like this that we get to share with families. I know it can help us feel like, oh, nothing's wrong. This is normal. Good to talk about those invisible things about practice.

Barbie Wong ([12:27](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Well, it depends on your child. Some children love stickers and they might need a sticker chart, and there's so many different ways. Maybe you have a paper calendar that's put up near the practice area and every day they practice, they just put a sticker down on that date. It could be really anything. With my own children, I gave them, I call it an incentive. Once they were done practicing, then they could do the things that they consider fun, then they could hang out with their friends, then they could go and chill out whatever they wanted to do. So they just had to get their practice done. And I just made that part of our family culture and it wasn't a threatening thing that I said. I just said, oh, okay, part of the day or every day, once you're done with your music practice, then you get to do these other things.

([13:20](#)):

And of course they will. They complained definitely, oh, my friends don't have to do this. Oh, why do we have to do this? That's very normal. And I just say, well, every family has their own culture and parents for the most part, get to determine the culture. For instance, some families, they go to church every Sunday, don't, part of our family culture is there's music that happens. So I think part of it is setting up a structure, but also just realizing and having confidence in yourself that music is a priority in the household and to make that happen. And of course, scheduling it in once it's in the schedule, that helps. I've also recommended sometimes for parents who have a very busy schedule to set timers on their

phone, maybe the timers are the same day each day, but maybe it's different. And a lot of timers now can be done in a fun way, you can choose a certain song for the timer to go off and things like that. Or I should say, this is probably more alarms and your child could help you pick out these songs. And then that way when it goes off, it's a reminder, oh, it's time to practice, or, oh, it's time to practice in 10 minutes. This is just a little warning that we will start practice in 10 minutes.

Christine Goodner ([14:45](#)):

Yeah, I like that a lot. I do think the timers help me when I have a really busy schedule, but I know, okay, I have to practice. I think otherwise our days are so busy. Most people listening to this could probably relate that if we wait for a magical time to appear where nothing's happening and we can practice typically does not happen in my life. And when my kids were young and in our lives then either. It's just there's so much going on. So I think the other thing that came up when you were talking too is that if our kids see that we are having this routine, first we practice, then we do other things we enjoy. Yes, they will have days when they complain and bump up against it, but also I think the complaining minimizes when it's very consistent. I think the more we make exceptions and be like, oh, well today you don't have to, parents tell me it actually backfires because then their child's like, well, if I complain today, maybe also an exception can happen. And actually it makes everybody have a more pleasant time if it's, there's extreme circumstances we may not get our practice in, but otherwise this is the routine. It's always this way, just brushing their teeth. Our kids may not always want to brush their teeth or put on their shoes or whatever else it is, but if they realize, no, my parents are going to enforce this, they kind of settle into their routine. I think that's actually, does our kids a favor? It's just hard to get through the grumbly phase.

Barbie Wong ([16:02](#)):

It is. It is because at the heart, all parents want their children to be happy. And when we see our child in distress, a lot of times our tendency is to say, oh, how do we get rid of the distress? And I think what happens is instead of viewing a child complaining as distress, we might just be like, oh, okay. This is just part of what happens with learning music is some resistance happens. And the best thing we can do, as you were saying, Christine, is to stay consistent as much as we can. And we could have days where I did this with my children, there were days when either I was too exhausted to enforce practice or whatever, and I would say, okay, play three of your favorite pieces, and that's all I could enforce. And then that was the practice for the day. And sometimes just getting them to the instrument and if they just end up playing something, then that's a win.

Christine Goodner ([17:02](#)):

And they still have the routine of most days I practice, which is great. I think that's worth it just for that routine piece of it. And if you're a parent listening, I know it can feel like, well, I signed my child up for an activity that I thought they would find fun and that I want them to enjoy, but they're complaining. It seems like these things don't line up. And I think sometimes we can compare music practice to other activities our kids are in, but I think it could be like if you're on a sports team and you want to play in the

game on the weekend, for example, you might not always feel like going to the practices, the coaches scheduled, but you go because you want to sit in the game and maybe the game is really fun. Some kids will love the practices and the game, and other kids don't always. And I think music practice can feel a little bit like that. A lot of kids love to play. They love to play with other kids. They love to with their teacher in the lesson, they love to perform whatever it is for your child. But the day-to-day practice, there could be ups and downs with that, or it could really be, I felt always grus about practice, but they love their lesson and they love performing or this or that. I mean, that's really normal. I see that a lot. I don't know about you Barbie.

Barbie Wong ([18:05](#)):

Oh yeah, that's very normal. It's so common. And I think that's the one thing that doesn't get discussed enough perhaps, is just all of these intricacies of raising a child who's learning an instrument and how it is different. I think it's different from sports and other activities. Sports have a wonderful built in group aspect to it. For the most part, most sports do, and it's hard with music because sometimes space-wise and also it's hard to practice with other, well, you can't practice with other people really. You can rehearse. You have to practice by yourself because there's sound. Unless you're electric instruments with all headphones, you have to practice by yourself. So I think the nature of music is a little harder, but the rewards are great. And that's where music, I think wins out over so many activities. It is a lifelong activity. Your child can play their instrument for their entire lives and what a gift it is to give the child that ability.

Christine Goodner ([19:21](#)):

So true. So true. And I guess I would encourage people to zoom out and not decide their child enjoys or doesn't enjoys their instrument based on daily practice. Look at the bigger picture of all the things they're doing with their music, with others, or what they could be doing that you could get them involved in. Because sometimes the fun parts are not the daily practice, and that's okay, as we've just been saying. So, alright, well Barbie, thank you so much. Anything else you want to share with people before we go today about practice routines or any closing thoughts you want to share with people as they go into their practice week?

Barbie Wong ([19:54](#)):

Yeah, I think one of the things I tend to think about as you were mentioning is the big picture. And so if you have a favorite musician or someone that you really admire, I think it's worth looking into what they were doing when they were young. Because what I've been doing with looking into the lives of musicians is I find so many of them did not want to practice and did not enjoy practice when they were young. But because they had a parent who kept saying, no, no, no, you have to keep practicing, then they kept improving and then they got to where they are. And even people who are amateurs, that's a very similar thing. I am not a virtuoso by any means, but I have a high level of musicality and musical skills on the piano, and I didn't want to practice when I was a kid, and I was now so grateful that my parents told me, no, you've got to practice. So yeah, just think about the big picture and also know that you're not alone.

You have so many resources like Christine's podcast and just keep listening to this stuff and keep reaching out to other parents because all in this together.

Christine Goodner ([21:07](#)):

Exactly well said, yes, there are ways to make the practice more tolerable, more neutral for your child so you don't feel like you have to be stuck forever enforcing a practice that they, for example, are hating or something like that. There's ways to make it more positive. Barbie's got great ideas and resources, and I share them off here too, and share with other people in your studio or ask your teacher for some ideas to make the practice itself more tolerable for your child if they're really not liking it. But there's so many beautiful things about music and so many fun things about music when our kids have played long enough to play ensembles or play with others, or it gets to make music, kind of music. They're excited to make or learn songs they're excited to learn. There's so many wonderful things that are worth the effort to get through the practice struggles. So we hope this gives you some ideas and some motivation. Thanks so much, Barbie for joining me today.

Barbie Wong ([21:58](#)):

Oh, it's my pleasure.

Christine Goodner ([22:01](#)):

Before we go today, I want to share how you can connect with Barbie. You can find her [website@barbiewong.com](mailto:website@barbiewong.com) and you can find resources there if you are a parent looking to support your own child in practice. And also if you're a teacher who's looking for resources to share with families in your program. Barbie and I run a community together called Musical Nest. We are going to be having a practice challenge in the month of October, and you can find information about that at [barbiewong.com/community](http://barbiewong.com/community). We'd love to invite you to join us there. If something in this episode was helpful to you or resonated with you, please share it with someone in your life who could benefit from listening. That is one of the big ways you can help keep this podcast going. All right, everyone. With that, I will wish you a great week of practicing and routine building. Take very good care.