



Episode 101: How Do I Help My Child Make More Progress in Music Lessons with Barbie Wong

Christine Goodner:

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 glad you're here. If you're enjoying these episodes or are looking for practice tips and resources throughout the month, I would love to invite you to join my newsletter. I just send this out once monthly, is the way I balance this work with my teaching schedule. And each newsletter you receive will be filled with updates on podcast episodes, any upcoming events that might be happening, and also some tips and resources that I have encountered in the last month that are inspiring me or that I want to share that I think will inspire you. So I love you to join. You can find the signup for that at Suzukitriangle.com/newsletter, and now on to this week's episode.

Alright, welcome everyone. I'm excited to be here again with our special guest, Barbie Wong, who's a frequent guest on our podcast sharing ideas about practice and supporting parents as they support their children practicing. So thank you Barbie for joining us again this month.

Barbie Wong:

Oh, it's great to be here.

Christine Goodner:

Well, we are going to jump into a frequently asked topic today that we, Barbie and I both have some ideas we would love to share with you. Something that I hear from people a lot is sometimes a frustration with the pace that their child is progressing on the instrument. We could just perceive that another student is learning pieces faster than our child. There's some just as human nature to sometimes compare, how is my child progressing compared to others I see around me in the studio? And so we want to address maybe some ideas about even just that comparison, but also some ideas for you if you're thinking, how do I help my child progress as much as I can? What's in my control as the parent and caregiver supporting them to help them make as much progress as they naturally can? So I'm excited to talk about this today.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, it's a great topic and it's something that parents have come to me and asked about too.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Yeah. And I think it is human nature to just compare what's going on between one student and another when we see them in recitals and things like this. And I think one thing I'd just like to start off our conversation with, and then I'd love you to respond, Barbie, and I am assuming we are on the same page, but I think it's really, we want to be careful about comparisons because we don't know what's going on with another student. We might see that our student next to another student at a recital or child, and we don't know how many hours a day or how much time a day a family has to practice. We don't know if there's learning challenges or supports the student needs or doesn't need. We don't know so many things, how many other activities a child's balancing along with their practice. And there's a lot of things that can affect progress looks like from the outside, that really aren't comparable or really aren't in anybody's control to be able to adapt from one student to another. So I think we do want to be really careful we're not comparing that sort of outward progress, but really what's going on is behind the scenes and messier than it seems or then we can control.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah. Yeah, it's true. I think a lot of times when I've seen the comparisons and then you start to look at what's behind the scenes, it's like, oh, okay, there's all these different things happening, and so that's why this is happening, but it's really impossible to know unless you're wanting to talk to these people and understand every single little aspect. It's better to just focus on what's happening with your own child.

Christine Goodner:

I agree. I do think that is really important because we can start to feel bad or feel like something's wrong when really it's just like everybody's on their own journey and who knows 10 years in the future, if you compare the same two students again, they could be at the exact same place or a different student could be ahead in quotes of others, and we're just measuring at a point in time. So I would just first say is I think we want to acknowledge if we are finding ourselves, comparing it's human nature to compare, it's just what our brains do, but also to take it with a real grain of salt about what we're seeing and why that might be happening. But all of that being said, we want to share with you some tips today just about could we help with as parents and caregivers with practice that could help our student make the most progress they're able to at this moment in time. So what's one idea that you'd like to share with us about that today? Barbie,

Barbie Wong:

I think one of the most important things is to talk to the teacher. If you're having concerns of this sort, the teacher is your guide, the person who is guiding your child's musical journey. And so if you have these concerns, talk as soon as you, if this is nagging at you, it's really important to communicate. And just in general, communicating things to the teacher is helpful. I really like it when I hear from parents, even if they think it's like, oh, this is a strange thought or this might be petty. It's like, no, let's talk about it. Let's address it. And then I feel like as a teacher I can then help, oh, let's address this so that it doesn't become this big thing later on. So really ask the teacher for guidance.

Christine Goodner:

And I think one of the thoughts I had too is along those same lines, sometimes some skills that our child is gaining that might feel like they're going slowly is really a skill that takes six months, a couple years, I'm thinking like vibrato on a stringed instrument. There's certain skills that we can learn more quickly if we just put in more efforts. And there's other skills that no matter how much effort we're putting in, it's still going to take a really long time for or proficient note reading for example, or being able to sight read easily. Some of these skills just take time and can't. There's no way to speed them up necessarily. We can put in as much effort as possible, but they're still going to take some time. And those are conversations we may not know if we don't talk to our teacher about it.

And so I think understanding, oh, if we put in more practice on this, your child will progress quicker. Great, let's work on that at home. Other things might be we have to be patient and just keep putting in the amount of work you're doing and trust the process. And I think talking with your teacher can really help us gain that particular perspective. And I always love as well people to bring it up with me. I don't want people to be stressed about things when it's really just, we should have talked about it or I should have shared more clearly about it. So that's a big one for sure.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I think keeping that line of communication open and asking when is a good time to talk to the teacher, perhaps out of earshot of your child, maybe it's a phone conversation or maybe it's a, Hey, can

we use the last five minutes of lessons and the child goes and plays in a different room, something like that.

Christine Goodner:

Right? Yes. You could ask your teacher if you're not sure. I have had a parent tell me before I have something to bring up with my teacher, but I dunno how to do it without my child's hearing. So if you're not sure how your teacher wants to be communicated about things like this, then I would just ask them, if I want to talk to you about something without my child here, what could we do? So you understand if they want you to email or use the lesson time or set up a conference, I would really encourage you to ask. Sometimes as teachers, we think it's obvious how we want to be communicated with, but we don't want you to feel, I wouldn't want you to feel like there's not a format for that. It's sometimes just a matter of asking how to do it. So yeah, definitely.

And another one that comes to mind for me about how good do we help make more rapid progress is more listening. And Edmund Springer, who is a guest on the podcast last month, I've heard him say before that listening is the closest thing to magic that we have in the Suzuki method because it just can really help if the music is coming from the inside out instead of trying to stuff it inside of ourselves from the outside in. And listening is a really big piece of that, especially in the Suzuki method. But I would say even if you're not a Suzuki student listening to this, also listening to other people playing the instrument, your child's studying, listening to the pieces you're learning can really, really help with understanding music as a language Suzuki taught us. And I think that's a very wise way to approach it. So if we don't know how it's going to sound, for example, if we're learning another language, it's going to be very hard to ever speak fluently. So I really encourage you to ramp up the listening if you're wondering how to speed things up.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, yeah, I agree. And for me, it's pretty clear, especially when students first come to me, so they're completely new to me, and I can tell fairly quickly which ones have households that listen to a lot of music and which ones don't. Fascinating because all these hours of listening, it makes an imprint in the brain and the child, then it's like they can find the notes more easily. And also the nuances of music are more easily conveyed when I'm trying to teach the child. So yes, I love that idea. Listen, listen more and play. Yes. Play both the music that your child is learning and also play music that you enjoy so that the child sees you enjoy music.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, yes. That's also very important. Absolutely. What else would you add to our list of ways to speed up our progress? Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

I think it's really important to figure out what's happening in the actual practice session, and perhaps this is something to also talk to the teacher about, because sometimes if practice is going in a way where the child is just sort of playing things randomly or it's not actually focused practice and it's not making the specific repetitions that will then help the child learn a piece in a specific way, then they won't make any progress or their progress will be slower. Yeah. So then of course, if you don't know what that's supposed to look like, it might be good perhaps to take a short little video of the child's practice and then share it with the teacher and say, Hey, is this how we're supposed to practice? Because a lot of times I know I'll send kids home with a practice assignment, and when they come back next week, sometimes I'll say, oh, they totally practiced the way I wanted to practice. And sometimes they don't. And if the teacher isn't talking about that very much, then it would be good for you if you can do this at home to really listen and see what is happening with the practice session. Is my child following those specific guidelines set out by the teacher?

Christine Goodner:

Yes. I so agree. I so agree on my list was very targeted practice, which is what you're saying. I think, and I'll just add to what you said, another way to be clear, are we practicing what the teacher's asking? Maybe take a short video, ask your teacher, can we take a short video of this assignment? You're giving us the new assignment that sometimes I'll have people, it's a new phrase or it's this is how we're holding the bow and bending our thumb in a different way this week or whatever it is. But sometimes a video or a picture, it's just a short one, can really help you to refer to something at home in practice to make sure are you practicing it the way the teacher has asked you? And it also helps you clarify this is what the teacher wants. If you get to do that, or if you're taking notes in the lesson about what you're going to practice, you could even ask some questions.

I'm always open to that. What would you like us to focus on or what's most important about what we just said? If it's not clear to you? I think being really clear what your teacher's asking and then putting a lot of your focus practice into that thing during the week, it really does make a big difference. It seems simple to say, but it's hard to do in the midst of all the things we're managing when we're practicing at homes. But that can really make a huge difference. Sometimes I'm waiting to move on to a new piece, a new skill, until I see one very small specific thing improve. I do try to be clear about it, but I'm kind of giving the student a roadmap to practice at home. And then it really depends on the communication being clear and then the roadmap being followed to get to that next step. So really specific practice can help.

Barbie Wong:

Yeah. Thank you for suggesting or talking about the videos, because videos are so important without, we can write down words, but the words a lot of times don't convey how a person is supposed to play something or hold their hand or whatever it is. And sometimes words can actually get in the way of how things are supposed to be done. I mean, I think about how just the hand is supposed to be placed. I am a pianist. If you place it at the piano in a certain way, if you use the words curve your fingers, a lot of times tension starts to happen in the hand. And so that's why I try not to use words when showing a child how

to place their hands on the keyboard. And so that's another reason for the video to capture something that's really indescribable.

Christine Goodner:

I think that can help with practice a lot and as a side issue to what we're talking about today. But sometimes debates come up like the teacher said this. No, the teacher said that between kids and parents. It also settles that kind of debate when you have video evidence of what your teacher wants you to do. Any other thoughts from you Barbie about practicing and increasing our progress?

Barbie Wong:

I think also one of the things, and this is something by the way, that I didn't learn until my second child started learning music. Another thing is to really focus on the actual things that are progressing. So maybe your child isn't progressing by leaps and bounds, but if your child is practicing consistently is practicing as instructed, they will make progress. And so it's really important to celebrate all of those little pieces of progress. And even if it's the same thing over and over again, wow, you're sitting really tall today, just like you did the last four days, just mentioning that to the child, they can feel like, oh yeah, I am. It reminds them that they are making progress and that really fuels motivation.

Christine Goodner:

I do think it's really easy to look at all the things that aren't perfect yet, because I feel like we're in a discipline where things will never be exactly perfect. So it's very easy to see all the things that need improvement and not to focus on what's also going really well. And it seems counterintuitive if you want to improve things to be praising something else. Maybe it did to me as a parent first starting out. But I do think the more we can focus on the positive, the more confidence builds and the more it feels like, okay, well this is worth all the hard work getting better. And if you have to look for those things as the parent, I think it also helps us feel that way too, so we can see progress happening. Yeah. Well, this gives us a few ideas. Hopefully if you're listening about what to do, I do think listening, looking at the big picture, giving a lot of praise and noticing what is going well, that targeted focus practice and focusing in on the things really that your teacher is hoping improves before the next step can really help get you where you're going.

So we hope that gives you some food for thought, some conversations with your teacher potentially about what you want to do next and some confidence that you're on the right track and these things take time. So encouraging where our child is now and also how far they've come is really important, along with the we wish they were further along, which is human nature of course. Any final thoughts before we go Barbie?

Barbie Wong:

Yeah, I think just the journey is so different for each person, and I think you just really think about this is time with your child that you're never going to have back. And to maybe focus on that, of course,

progress is great. Progress feels motivation, but also maybe learning a musical instrument isn't just that. Maybe it's a chance for you two to connect in some way. And I think having that shift in perspective can be really helpful.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Well, that's a great note to end on today. Thanks for joining me. Thanks for listening, everyone. We hope you have a great week of practice ahead. Before we go today, I wanted to say a quick note that no matter what level your child is at in their music journey, whether they're a beginner or more intermediate or more advanced, I think all of these tips could be tailored to each student's level, asking for expert advice, like talking to our teacher, getting some perspective on how long we can expect things to take. Listening and listening also, which I love that Barbie mentioned to music that inspires us. Thinking about specific practice strategies and very targeted practice. What that looks like can really vary from beginner level to advanced. But I think all of us can think more about how could I practice this with a new strategy that's going to help me get where I want to be.

And then I think also that advice of thinking about how far we've come and the progress that has been made. So this is not just advice for beginners. I think we can all apply those ideas to the level we're at, the level our child is at, and hopefully there's a few helpful reminders in there and a few ways to get yourself looking in the right direction so you know where you can support your child best or yourself best. If you're a musician yourself too, would love to hear what you took away from this episode and what you tried or what this reminded you of that you put back into your practice this week. You can send me an email, christine@suzukitriangle.com, or you can reach out to me in Instagram at Suzuki Triangle is my handle there. And Barbie can be found on Instagram at Barbie Wong Music. You can also find her website barbie wong.com and join us if you'd like to check out our small community that we host, which is a really vibrant group of people supporting practice for their own students and children@barbiewong.com slash community. You'd like to connect with Barbie and I both there with that time to practice community. So grateful for you to be with us this week. Wishing you a good week of practice ahead with lots of joy making music in your life. Take good care.