

Let's first take a look at one of the conversations that took place between a parent and me.

P: Ms. Zhai, I am afraid that we have to skip tomorrow's piano lesson.

I: Again? Constantly skipping lessons is detrimental to the child's learning progress.

P: She (the daughter) hasn't been practicing much lately. She also felt unwell tonight and went to sleep early. In fact, she is quite unfamiliar with many of the pieces from the repertoire. She is afraid you will scold her.

I: That's fine. If she feels unwell, then let her take more rest. Nonetheless, I suggest avoiding skipping lessons. Skipping a lesson simply because she can't play a piece will likely result in her developing a habit for it. Imagine her skipping a lesson because it's windy, it's raining, she is in a bad mood, there is a visitor to home, or the finals are approaching. How is it even remotely possible for her to develop a proper habit of learning anything and even more importantly, self-control or self-restraint? The fundamental objective of education is to cultivate a positive study habit. Also, your daughter can't really learn anything by repeating the same mistakes over and over, am I right?

P: It's not because she is feeling unwell. The main issue here is that she didn't practice.

I: Never offer her any reason to skip a lesson. Or it would become increasingly likely for her not to care about learning to play the piano. If she ever develops such a mentality, then it's game over - there is no point in letting her continue. The main point I am stressing here is that regardless of any problem or difficulty, she must persist. Persistence leads to good habits. In other words, no pain, no gain. Now back to your daughter's problem. Even if she didn't practice, it will be much more productive for her to come to the lesson than to simply stay at home. I have recently analyzed the class results and determined that those children who came to the lessons in a consistent basis saw the most improvement in their playing skills.

P: I understand, we will definitely come to tomorrow's lesson.

From this conversation, we can find a problem quite common and widespread in the field of music education - the parents have little understanding of the uniqueness of studying music. They simply don't know or believe the extreme importance of persistence when studying music. On average, it is recommended that a student take two lessons per week. At the very least, one lesson a week must be guaranteed. The parents must remember never to give up, if they want their children to succeed. Persistence is the exactly the very type of attitude the parents would want to instill in their children. During the course of learning a new music instrument, it is very common for the children and their parents to make unnecessary mistakes. At these moments, it is

vital for the teacher to make the necessary adjustments to prevent these mistakes' reoccurrence. Skipping lessons constantly would, undoubtedly, negatively affect the teacher's ability to do so.

Now, in regard to persistence, I had (and still have) a student who would always wander off during the lessons in the very beginning. The student paid little to no attention during the lessons and made numerous mistakes when he was playing the piano. For a long period of time, the child simply could not pull himself together. On numerous occasions, I myself even got discouraged and thought about persuading the parents to let their child quit. I never got a chance to do so because the mother was very persistent. Even though she was very concerned and agitated, she never gave up and would always send her child over to take the lesson every week. I remember on one occasion telling the mother not to worry because every child is different and her child had to take it slowly. I could sense the mother was very unhappy with what I had to say. I totally empathize with her and feel her pain. We continued the lessons until one day I was amazed by the child's playing - for the first time, he did not make a single mistake when playing a set of notes. The child and I were both very much encouraged. Nowadays, even though he would still wander off at times, the child has seen drastic improvement in his skills.

I believe every child is different and therefore the pace of learning varies. During the course of learning, we would have to confront and overcome many difficulties. The most important thing to remember during this whole time is to never give up. The parents must learn to give enough space and time for their children to develop that sense of persistence.

Many have argued that learning a music instrument is not a test of a child's intellect, but rather the parents' patience and endurance. Let us think for a moment, in many cases, the root of the problem often lies with the parents.

Sometimes the parents take into account the fees. It is understandable that when a child plays poorly after many lessons, it's time to quit. However, studying music is not a business. The parents may have saved the money, but they could also have lost a valuable opportunity to establish and cultivate a good habit. Professor Zhao Xiaosheng once said it is enough to learn just one note when studying piano. I was deeply touched by this. But for this to happen, one must have complete trust of the teacher. If no such trust exists, then it's best to switch to another teacher.

In my opinion, it is quite true that behind every outstanding pianist, there is a tiger father or a tiger mother. Famous examples include Lang Lang and Yundi Li. I totally understand that it is impossible not to skip a lesson once or twice. However, the parents and the child must uphold that sense of persistence. The parents must not only evaluate the child's learning progress and the teacher's lesson quality, but also their own attitude toward their child's learning the piano as well.

Often I would hear parents complain to me that their children were very hardworking and efficient during the lessons, but once they got home, it's a completely different picture - they would become unwilling to practice and get easily distracted. In my opinion, the cause of all these is rather plain - an environment conducive to good study behavior does not exist. In fact, the parents should ask themselves what they are doing when their child is practicing. Are they playing with their phones, watching TV, talking or playing Mahjong? Or maybe they are doing the chores and would sporadically ask their child to keep up with their practice. All these scenarios I mentioned would definitely affect a child and the practice. There is a very simple solution to all of these - either the parents stop distracting the child or continue with what they have to do, but make sure that the child attend lesson everyday.

Lastly, I have to emphasize that learning to play the piano is not just simply learning a skill or a trade, but also a culture, an attitude, and most importantly, the cultivation of one's inner self. If one can learn and appreciate the value of persistence, I believe that he/she will not only succeed in playing the piano, but in other fields as well. In the meantime, the parents are an indispensable component of such learning experience.