

# Katie Suzuki Music Lessons

---

## Philosophy of the Suzuki Method

The Suzuki method is based on the way that children pick up their native language. It is sometimes called the "Mother Tongue" method.

The Suzuki method was developed around 1940 by Dr. Suzuki, a violinist in Japan. Dr. Suzuki marvelled at the way that children learn their native language. They enjoy learning to speak and they learn easily. He also noticed that EVERY child learns. No child (except those with severe disabilities) fails to learn their mother tongue. Dr Suzuki believed that music is a language and could be taught successfully using the same method.

After his study of how children learn language, Dr Suzuki concluded that:

- Learning should begin as early as possible and should be filled with fun, excitement and exploration
- The child should be immersed in the skill he is expected to learn - casual exposure is not enough
- Parental involvement must be present and the environment should be encouraging
- Acquired skills should be maintained and kept current, in the same way that a child keeps old words current by constantly using them as well as learning new words.
- Children should learn initially by copying sounds they hear and repeating them over and over. The children should be skilled at learning by rote and by ear before music reading is introduced.

### Benefits of children starting to learn music while young

- Adults brains are selective. Children's brains are not selective. For better or for worse they learn and copy everything that they are exposed to. If we wait until they are 'older' thinking that then practice will be easier and they will be more independent, we lose that critical period when their brain will most easily learn music. It is harder for adults to get into that focussed and open state to really learn a new thing well. It is as if our brains are already quite full and it is harder to get new skills in.
- Learning to play music involves learning both a new language (the language of music) and also a new physical skill (of playing the instrument).
- Childhood is the easiest time to learn either of these. Both languages and physical skills that we learn as a child (and that we keep using) remain fluent and easy.

### Listening

Even before they are born, children are surrounded by language. They can't turn their ears off so they listen and absorb everything. The Suzuki method aims to surround children with music in the same way. The child is not made to sit and listen to the CD, the music is just played in the background – while eating, playing, travelling in the car, going to sleep. The progress of the child at the beginning is strongly related to how much listening they do.

### Repetition

Repetition is essential for children to automate one skill enough to be able to concentrate on adding another skill. Luckily, children usually love repetition (of things that are fun, interesting or challenging to them). Therefore, we must make repetitions fun, interesting or challenging so that the children can experience the success of acquiring a previously difficult task.

### Memorisation

As children learn language, they don't discard their first word when they have learned their second. They continue to use both words and to constantly add new words till they have a huge repertoire of words they can use. By the time a child finishes learning the pieces in book one, they will be able to play 20 minutes of music from memory. This is not only a great feat of memory but also of concentration.

### The importance of environment

One reason that children are so keen to learn to speak is because of the environment provided by the parents. Think back to the enthusiasm of your response when your baby said their first word, no wonder they were keen to say it again and again! Try to create the same encouraging and rewarding environment and to find the same delight in your child's first attempts at making music. The way in which you approach music lessons will rub off on your child. Praise is very important in learning any skill, especially when you're dealing with a small child learning a difficult instrument. Do be honest, but there is always something you can say that is both honest AND encouraging!

### Children learn at their own pace

When children first learn to speak, they repeat their first word very many times before they are ready to add a second word. It will probably not take quite as many repetitions of the second word, before they are ready to add a third. Learning an instrument is often like this. There is no hurry. Do not worry if it takes a term or more till a young child is playing a 'piece' (twinkle), or a year before a young child plays anything other than the twinkles. Just like with language, provide plenty of exposure (listening) and encouragement and the child will progress at the rate that is right for them.

### Focal points

Music is a complex subject and needs to be broken down into small chunks in order for children to understand. Hence, the Suzuki method teaches in many small steps. The size of the steps is tailored to each individual child and in this way the children set their own pace.

The teacher observes the child and often chooses just one focal point to concentrate on. Even though there may be other things that need work too, these things might not even be mentioned. If the one point can be thoroughly corrected in everything the child plays for the week, then it is a great achievement and the child will be ready to move on to something else.

### Music reading

We don't expect a child to learn to read each word at the same time as they first learn to say it. We accept that they will learn to speak first and to read later. With music, we develop the children's ability to play by ear first, then they learn to read later.

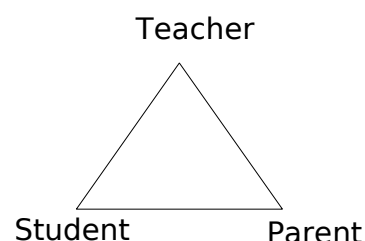
### The bigger picture

Dr Suzuki developed his teaching method in the 1940s because he wanted to provide some beauty into the lives of the children around him, despite the hardships of the war. He noticed how natural and effortless it was for children to learn their native language and he wanted to enable them to learn music in a similar way. He thought that if they learned to play beautiful music together it would help heal the world from the war. So Suzuki method is not only about teaching children to play music. It also aims to produce happy, confident children with good concentration and sensitivity, who love music and love learning. The daily quality time parents spend practicing with their children is an integral component of the success of the method.

The Suzuki method is not new. It has been in use since the beginning of language if not before, but Dr. Suzuki was the first to realise its significance, analyse it and apply it intentionally to other areas to benefit the development of children everywhere.

## The role of the parent in Suzuki lessons

The triangle of teacher, student and parent is often shown as an equilateral triangle to illustrate the equal importance of these three elements in the success of the lessons. For this reason it is important that it is always the same "parent" (or grandparent or guardian) who brings the child to their lessons.



### Role of the parent during the lesson

- Be on time for lessons and have any books required, plus notepaper and pen.
- If you have other children to look after during the lesson, try to plan something quiet for them to do so that you can concentrate on the lesson.
- Parents do need to stay during all lessons. You are part of the team. For a beginner of any age and especially a young child, you have the important role of listening and note-taking so that you can help your child to practice.
- Although during practice you will be the 'teacher', during lessons please let me do the teaching! It can be hard on the child to have instructions coming from both sides.
- In particular, don't correct the child during the lesson. I might see much that could do with correction but I will choose to focus on only one or two things. You can write notes about other things that you'd like to bring up later.
- Please don't answer questions for your child. If it isn't clear who I am asking, please assume I am asking the child, I need to see what they themselves know!
- Please make sure that the student's finger nails are kept reasonably short
- Please don't have your child chewing gum during lessons

### Role of the parent outside of lesson-time:

- Play the whole Suzuki mp3s/CD every day for as many hours as possible.
- Provide a happy, relaxed, encouraging environment
- Ensure regular (near-daily) practice. You are home-teacher and will be providing most of the structure and motivation for practice. We don't expect your child to do any practice by themselves until they are much older. For now, it's important that you're right there with them for every practice session. Review is different and your child might be able to do this without you, so on the days when you can't manage a 'proper' practice session see if you can get your child to at least play some review pieces.

## Workshops, camps and concerts

I recommend that you take your children to other music events both to perform and to listen. Children benefit from being exposed to a wide range of instruments, music styles and ideas.

See whether there is a Suzuki Institute in your country. Most Suzuki institutes run workshops and camps with guest teachers, group music classes, parent talks and concerts.

## Priorities in teaching and practice

For students at any level my teaching priorities are:

- 1. Balanced and relaxed posture**
- 2. Beautiful tone and accurate technique:** Nice sound, accurate notes and fingering (and for violin, correct bowings and intonation)
- 3. Musicianship**

Your priorities in practice can follow this order as well. It is tempting (especially for adults and older children) to be impatient to move onto the 'next' piece. It is important to build your child's skills in pretty much this order and not to let the earlier skills slip as the notes become more advanced.

## Structure of lessons

Lessons will start and end with the teacher and student bowing to each other. This was how Dr Suzuki started and ended his lessons in Japan and it is still done this way in most Suzuki lessons around the world. I like that it gives the student a clear start and end to the lesson.

Violin students always stand up for the whole lesson.

At lessons, usually every piece is heard in order from the beginning of the book up to the child's working piece. This means that the child needs to retain the earlier pieces in order to get up to their working piece. This will be continued for as long as possible (usually till the second half of book 1) but at some point there won't be time to do this and then the order usually becomes exercises, review pieces, working piece. Children will work towards playing

their review pieces along with the mp3. Initially, you'll slow down the mp3 so that they can keep up, but the end aim is to be able to play with the full-speed mp3.

In the first few books, the children will be learning their pieces by ear and from memory. I encourage you to have the music book handy for you to look at, but not for the child to use. Rhythm reading is usually started during book 1 and 'proper' music reading around the start of book 2. This will be using a different book from the Suzuki book so the Suzuki pieces will still be learnt mostly by ear and from memory.

## Making Music Practise Enjoyable and Effective

### Timing of practise sessions

Your practise time should be quality, enjoyable time spent together. Ideally choose a practise time that can be regular every day, a time when you are not likely to be distracted and when the child is not likely to be hungry or tired or involved in play. Often straight after breakfast is a good time. Prepare yourself before practise time by reminding yourself what is supposed to be practised, preparing any side-activities you plan to use and by putting your phone on silent. Try not to need to cook dinner or make lunches at the same time. By preparing yourself you also show your child that practise time is important. Giving your undivided attention is part of what makes practise time special for both of you.

If you suspect that your child might be a bit reluctant to start the practise session, introduce it gradually... put on the CD quietly, let them see you tune up the violin or set the piano footstools so they are just right. You will have tried to choose a time when your child won't be involved in anything else but if they are, then give them a few minutes to wind down what they are doing and change focus to music. Perhaps hum some of the pieces that will be practised or chat about some of the practise points e.g. "What was it the teacher was talking about at the last lesson, something about the black keys" or "There was something about the bow hand thumb wasn't there... was it like this? No maybe like this".

### Never ask the child if they want to practise!

Most children really enjoy being able to play music even if they are not always that keen on 'practising'. They enjoy playing music when they feel they are good at it and the environment is happy and relaxed. Practise is a necessary part of becoming competent enough to enjoy playing the pieces.

Don't expect your child to always want to practise because most children will go through phases when they would rather not. Don't ask whether they want to practise, unless you're willing to accept "no" as an answer! Think of it like brushing their teeth. This is something that you consider to be important so you make sure it happens regularly. You probably don't ask them whether they like brushing their teeth or not, it is just something that happens (hopefully) every day at a regular time. Think of music playing the same way. I do expect my students to play their instrument (pretty much) every day. Sometimes they will be enticed to come and play if you start doing your own music practise.

Plan in advance so you have some creative and inventive ideas to keep practise interesting and enjoyable for you both.

Aim to keep practise sessions light-hearted and enjoyable, and aim to stop when the child is still willing to do more. For young children especially, it is better to do a few short sessions in a day rather than one long one. Young children will also need it to be more of a game than older children. Sticker charts can be helpful sometimes but try not to lose sight of the true aim of actually learning to play music (rather than just to get a sticker). Try making practise into a time of experimentation and discovery e.g. "Let's see how many times in a row your hand can play that little part correctly. You play and I'll count". If practise is a real struggle, just stop there for that session and spend some time by yourself thinking of inventive and creative ways to make practise more interesting and enjoyable tomorrow. No method will work forever so you will need to constantly come up with new ideas. The most important thing is for the child to be happy to come back to music practice again to have another go the following day.

Be positive but honest. Praise effort rather than results.

Don't show annoyance or disappointment with your child's playing. Even if there were many things wrong, there is always something good to say, if you look hard enough and think of the big picture! Perhaps they kept their feet still for the whole piece or they had the notes in the correct order.

It is good to praise effort rather than results. E.g. say "good, you have worked very hard on that section" rather than "good, you seem to find this easy".

Enjoy the good times and ride out the not so good

Nothing breeds success like success. Although music study sometimes plateaus, I find that it more often spirals up or spirals down. If the child is practising regularly and effectively then they are usually making good progress and this gives them the confidence and interest to continue the cycle. If they are not practising regularly or if the practise is not effective they are usually not making good progress and often lose motivation to practise.

Adult musicians have rarely got through life without some low times in their music practise. Know that there will be ups and downs in your child's musical education. There will be times when they are unmotivated and other times when they are highly motivated and excited about playing music. Know that these phases will come and go you will ride them out together and you can always ask me for ideas.

The gradual transfer of responsibility to the child themselves

As your child matures they will not always need your undivided attention for their whole practise time, but at the beginning (even with an older child) you'll need to oversee every practise session. Until they are willing and able to take on the responsibility of practise for themselves, it remains with you to ensure that practise is regular and effective. Even when they no longer need you to be involved in their day-to-day practise, you will remain their secretary, encourager, organiser, admirer and counsellor for as long as they need/want you to be.

The difference between 'practising' and 'playing' music

'Playing' music involved playing pieces through from start to end. 'Practising' is quite different. During practise, the pieces will be broken into short sections, then attentively repeated, and analysed (preferably by the child themselves) as to whether the attempt achieved the aim or not. If it is difficult to get it right even once then either the section is too long or the playing should be slower.

Children generally enjoy doing what is easy and what they feel they are good at. Practise requires them to move out of their comfort zone and do something that is somewhat difficult for them, and to do it over and over again. It requires that they do things s-l-o-w-l-y at first so that they can learn to do them fast and accurately. Children don't usually do this naturally. It is the job of the teacher and parent to teach them how to do this. Only then can the child achieve effective practise by themselves.

There is great reward in the child proving to themselves that they can learn to do something difficult by attentive practise. It gives them the confidence to believe that they can also learn other difficult things, even in other areas of life, if they practise attentively.

Children often think it is the most fun to play as fast as they can. This is fine sometimes! But whenever you can, encourage careful, thoughtful playing. If the child frequently plays with incorrect fingering or fast and carelessly, then that is what their fingers are practising and it is what their fingers will do automatically.

#### Don't stress!

Lastly, don't worry that this all sounds too difficult! It is a model for you to work to like the CD is a model for the child to work to. They will not always match their model and you probably won't always match yours and that is fine. Just both do your best and try again the following day. There is much room for error and second chances.

---

And most of all, enjoy this special quality time you will have with your child, sharing their challenges and their joys ☺