



**“Mom, how do I play a G#?”**  
**A Parent’s Guide For The Young Musician’s Practice Experience”**  
by Marc Whitlock

This scene is all too familiar:

CHILD  
“Mom, can you help me with my math?”

MOM  
“Sure thing, sweetie!”

(...an hour later...)

CHILD  
“Dad, can you help me with my history?”

DAD  
“You got it, sport!”

(later that evening)

CHILD  
“Mom... Dad... can you help me practice my instrument?”

PARENTS “. . . . .uhhhh. . . . .surrrrrrre. . . . .you  
bet. . . . .”

(frantically searching on Google)

It is reasonable to assume that many parents have been in this situation without a clue on how to help their child, and doing an internet search will not provide the answer. Many parents have asked themselves, “I want to help my child with practicing but I don’t know anything about music and I wasn’t in band. How can I help?” As band directors, it can be difficult and frustrating to explain the practice regimen to parents with no musical background or experience. The disconnection from musical “common ground” seems as large as the Grand Canyon.



“Practice makes perfect!” We band directors know this is not the case. By learning how to practice *smartly* and *efficiently*, students will demonstrate higher rates of achievement and greater retention of information.

While time and a regular routine of practicing is important, the *quality* of their practice time is far more important than the quantity. Twenty or thirty minutes of *efficient* practice is more productive than an hour of unfocused practice.

The following information can assist band directors in their discussions with parents regarding the *successful* and *accountable* time and efforts of their child when practicing the instrument at home. These steps will also show the child that their parents care about their musical education, that practicing is not a pain or burden to others, and that this investment of time and preparation to ensure the child’s success will mean a lot to the child in the long run. If you find the following guide useful, please feel free to reproduce it for your program.

## **Home Practice Guide for Parents**

### **The Environment of Practice**

This is the first step a parent must take to ensure a successful practice session. The practice environment should be:

- **Relaxed and quiet** – Similar to studying any other academic subject, practicing an instrument **is** a mental process. The practice environment should be as similar to a library as possible, except that your child can make lots of good sounds here.
- **Correct Temperature** – The temperature range of 65-80 degrees is needed for the wind instrument to have the best chance to play in tune, with a temperature of 72 degrees being ideal. There are times that students have been sent to practice in the garage to avoid disturbing other people in the house. While it is understandable why parents might choose this course of action, it is not in the best interest of the child’s opportunity for success. The garage would have to be in the ideal temperature range. Abnormal temperatures can adversely impact the performance of their instrument,



could possibly damage the instrument, and can cause the child to dislike practicing. Also, it may create a poor perception for the child that practicing is a chore and an inconvenience, instead of a labor of love.

- **Sturdy Chair and Music Stand** – It is vital that the child’s practice space allow them to sit or stand in the same position they do in band class. A sturdy chair is important to help them sit in the correct posture. The child should never have to bend over to read their music, and a practice stand will allow the student to view their music exactly as they do on band class. Wire music stands are available for purchase at any reputable music company in your area.
- **Use a Mirror** – It is imperative that students always check their embouchure to ensure it is being formed correctly, as this concept will be covered in class and illustrations often occur in the beginning of most band method books. A locker mirror or other small mirror on their music stand will work well.

### **The Sounds of Practice**

There are several sounds that you should be hearing when your child is practicing. Students should be practicing music we play in class in an effort to make their performance in class and on stage truly outstanding.

#### ***This is what parents should hear***

- **The beeping of a metronome** – For home practice, students should use a metronome 95% of the time. This will help them keep steady tempo.
- **Counting and Clapping** – Counting out rhythms (like learning to read words) and then combining those rhythms with steady tempo will help your child develop motor skills and learn the concept of simultaneous responsibilities.
- **Note-naming** – Students should be saying the note names out loud while reading the staff lines of our music. This should also be done with a metronome, and ultimately, while fingering or positioning the notes being spoken.



- **Essential Sounds** – Students should be working on their sound with just the mouthpiece, mouthpiece and barrel, or head joint. This sound might be slightly irritating (especially with beginners), but it is crucial to their development of correct embouchure and tone quality. They should work for a steady sound that does not waver.
- **Long Tones** – The first sounds a student should make on their assembled instrument should be long and smooth tones. Their tone quality is one of the most important aspects of learning their instrument during the early years. Again, they should work for a steady sound that does not waver. Playing into a tuner with an open and relaxed sound, and keeping the “needle” perfectly steady can achieve this.

### ***This is what parents should NOT hear***

- **Goofing Off** – Students sometimes become inquisitive about their instrument and to try to make “unique” sounds as a result. They should never make deliberately poor sounds on their instrument. Students should not attempt to play extremely high or fast notes, including “sound effects.”
- **Just the Music** – Students should enjoy practicing and should want to play songs. However, at this point in their musical lives, they should also understand the importance of fundamentals. You should not only hear songs when they practice. Your child should be doing fundamental exercises along with note-naming and rhythm counting.
- **Silence** – Sometimes students try to say they have been practicing note-naming and rhythm counting for their entire practice time, but this should not be the case. Students should play their instrument for at least two-thirds of their practice time.

### ***Parent Practice: What you can do to assist your child?***

Make every attempt to ensure you are helping your child practice the correct way, with a good quality instrument, emulating the band program’s philosophy and regimen. **All parents** can help their child practice by doing any or all of the following:



- **Create a Healthy Environment** – Make sure they are practicing in a comfortable place as described above. Do not allow siblings to distract your child during practice. Also, please do not send them away or outside to practice. Practice should not become a negative experience for your child.
- **Scheduled Times** – Create a regular practice time for your child (preferably when you are home to hear him/her practice). When the habit of practicing at the same time every day occurs, your child’s practice routine will solidify.
- **Performances at Home** – Schedule a time every few days for your child to perform music for your family and/or friends. Encourage them to perform music or other concepts that they are playing in class or in their private lessons. This will allow them to have performance goals outside of class.
- **Ask Questions** – Have your child explain what his or her plan is for their practice session. Ask them about upcoming playing tests, assigned homework, or other class assignments such as scales, flow studies, or other warm-ups. Also, this is an opportunity for the child to teach the parent, which will make your child feel like a million bucks!
- **Observe Your Child Practice** – From time to time, listen to your child practice. Ask them to explain the process that they go through for each part of their practice session. You can also time them on note-naming games, breathing gym games, or rhythm card games. Feel free to mix it up!

If the Band Director requires practice logs/records, please do not “just sign” the practice log/record. Make sure your child is actually doing their homework for band. If you are uncertain, have them play for you on the assigned material for that day with this guide in front of you as a reference. It can empower you both to be successful and their efforts will be rewarding, not just individually, but to the band as a whole.

*The quality of daily home practice time directly impacts their playing level on their instruments. Thank you for supporting your child’s musical goals!*

See you at the next concert!



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