

# 'How Much Should My Child Practice?'

Posted on **October 23, 2019** by **Samantha Coates**



'How much should my child practice?' ... is a very difficult question and there is no single correct answer. Every teacher has a different outlook on practice, every student has different goals and capabilities, and every parent has different ideals and levels of support they can offer.

So let's talk about what it means to have fun at something. In my opinion, 'fun' means to enjoy what you are doing. If you don't feel you can do it, or if you are not improving at it, you probably won't enjoy it. Therefore, it is pretty much impossible to have 'fun' at something that you can't actually **do**.

Here are some examples:

Activity	Definition of fun	Requires
Basketball	Can play basketball with a reasonable degree of competence, so you enjoy the games and the training and contribute to the team. Can join informal games. Notice improvements week to week.	Practising in order to be able to dribble, run, catch and throw; understand rules of game, feel confident when playing.
Swimming	Can swim confidently enough so you can join in any recreational activities in the water.	Practising in order to be able to float, tread water, swim some strokes, feel confident when in water.
Card games/board games	Joining in, perhaps winning occasionally.	Practising in order to understand the rules of the game and strategies required; feel confident about participating.
Music	Can play instrument and understand music to a level that enables performance and/or joining a band or ensemble, or any recreational music making. Notice improvements week to week.	Practising in order to be able to actually play instrument, read music, improvise, join in an ensemble, feel confident when playing.

In all of these cases, practice of some sort is required.

**No practice = no competence = no fun.**

### Is Practice Fun?

In basketball, practice can be ‘fun’ because it is with the rest of the team. Swimming can be mightily stressful at first, but it is always with others, and most of us learn so young we don’t remember (and the learning phrase is usually short-lived). With card games and board games, we all know that the games we play the most frequently (which, in essence, are practised the most) are the ones we are best at and probably enjoy the most.

With music, practice doesn’t necessarily yield very immediate results, and the practice itself is solitary. No coach, no team, no peers... just the student and their instrument (and sometimes, hopefully, a supportive parent). So can we define practice as fun? Probably not. **But it is the practice that enables the fun.**

### A Practice Chart

In early October 2019, I designed and then [posted this chart on Facebook](#), which attempted to answer the practice question and also address the issue of having fun.

Practices per week	Time spent per practice	Reason for lessons	Progress?	Long-lasting musical impact?
6-7	1-5 hours	Competitive/high achieving/aspiring concert pianist	Yes	Yes**
4-5* *Fun Zone	20 mins – 1 hour	Have fun with music, achieve well, develop skills that last into adulthood	Yes	Most likely
2-3	10 mins – 30 mins	“Just want to have fun”	Not much	Very unlikely
0-1	0-30 minutes	“Just want to have fun”	No	No

I realised that this particular chart applies to my mostly-intermediate-and-aged-around-7-14-years studio. I also realised that there is no way a single chart can cater to all the music students in the world. That’s what teachers are for: to tailor experiences to individual students’ needs! Later in this [article] I’ll draw up a template so that you can make your own chart for your own studio, or even for each individual student. But first, some explanations about all the headings, subtitles and asterisks. As mentioned before, I’ll be talking about piano practice, but it can easily apply to other instruments and even to subjects other than music.

### The ‘Fun Zone’

The yellow section is the fun zone (4-5 practices per week). This is the section to show and explain to parents who say they ‘just want their child to have fun’. The orange and red sections will rarely result in a child having fun, because the practice is too infrequent.

4-5 practices per week is ideal for students who want to become adept at music but don’t necessarily want to prioritise it. They will end up having fun with their instrument. That’s not to say that practising 6-7 times per week won’t be fun, it just means that anything LESS than four practices per week is unlikely to yield skills that will enable the student to be able to play with any sort of competence. And as we’ve said before: you can’t have any fun at something you can’t actually DO. Practice = competence = fun.

## Frequency

This means number of visits to the piano each week. A 'visit' to the piano normally implies an actual practice session, but for young beginners it may be just a little play while passing by, which may happen several times per day! (Assuming the piano is in a busy part of the house).

The number of times per week practice occurs is by far the most significant factor in how much progress is made. I am constantly using sporting analogies in my studio and this is where students and parents really understand: just like we won't get fit by training once a week, even if it's a long session, we can't progress with one piano practice per week, even if it's a long session. It takes regular reinforcement for effective learning to occur.

So let's look at the frequencies that are mentioned in the chart:

- **6-7 days per week:** Having a daily piano practice routine is by far the most ideal scenario. Many teachers advocate a day off from practice, and NOT the day of the lesson (it's amazing how much reinforcement there is if you practice after your lesson!). This frequency will ensure progress in ANY student, even if the quality of the practice is less than mindful (more on this later). However, whilst a daily practice routine is indeed ideal, I find that most 21st century students are overscheduled and can't manage it.
- **4-5 days per week:** This frequency means a student is practising the majority of the week, and solid progress is possible. Given the schedules of most students today, this is still quite a big commitment, and is not regarded as a 'soft option' from parents. **This is the minimum frequency required to develop skills at the piano.**
- **2-3 days per week:** Now there are more days in the week of no practice than of practice; it is not present enough in the weekly routine. This means there is more forgetting, and less reinforcement, of skills. It's difficult to progress well in these circumstances.
- **0-1 days per week:** this amount of practice **will not work**. Every practice will seem the same, because there will be no skills retained from the previous practice, to build upon. There will be no progress and the task will seem hopelessly hard, ensuring a negative attitude to practice.

The biggest factor in frequency of practice, by far, is setting a practice routine. Practice should not be optional; it should be just as much a part of the routine as brushing teeth or doing homework. If you wait until the student 'feels like' practising, the practice may never happen at all.

## Time Spent

This is the part of the chart that got the most volatile reactions. 'Do you expect a six year old to practice 5 hours a day?' or 'I have had many students make fantastic progress on just 15 mins a day!' Answers to these comments are 'NO!' and 'That's wonderful!'.

Here are two rather well-known quotes, relating to time spent at the piano:

1. "Quality not quantity"
2. "Quantity has a quality all of its own"

Sure, mindful practice is important, as opposed to mindless repetition. It's up to teachers to teach students how to practice mindfully – this is not usually a skill that comes inherently. [The amount of practice] will depend largely on the current repertoire of the student.

For example, five minutes' mindful practice is plenty for a new beginner playing two very short pieces, but nowhere near enough for a student who is trying to learn an entire Beethoven sonata. This is where teacher guidance is essential, and it is the 'time spent' column that must be adjusted to each student's needs.

### Reason for Lessons

By this I mean the general goal of music tuition, that being the goal of the parents and/or the student. Most students studying music at uni/college understand the importance of regular, mindful practice, and would be unlikely to spend less than 1 hour per day on their instruments. Most students doing a high-level exam or competing in high-level festivals would need to spend at least an hour at the piano to get through all their repertoire and technical requirements. And as for 'aspiring concert pianist'... well, we've all heard the stories of multiple hours spent at the piano per day, for professional and semi-professional musicians.

I put 1-5 hours a day here as a guide for these high level/competitive/aspiring pianists, all of whom tend to be aged 12 and up. If they wish to be elite, they must put in a great deal of practice. Rarely have I come across a pianist in this category who is merely 6 or 7 years old (and if I did, I don't think I would necessarily encourage this path at such a young age).

### Progress?

In this column we answer the simple question of whether or not there will be progress. The higher the frequency, the better the progress. It's not about the total time spent in the week, it's about **how** and **when** that time is spent, in order to maximise learning.

Progressing makes us feel good, which makes us want to practice more, which makes us sound better, which makes us feel good, etc. It puts us in a **positive motivation loop**.

### Long-Lasting Musical Impact?

This heading was a touch ambiguous, I realised too late. I meant the impact on the student, not the impact the student makes on others. What I was really trying to get at here was 'Will the student retain their skills after lessons have ceased?'

Suggestions from readers and some more tweaking from me has yielded the following column heading options:

- "Retains skills long term?"
- "Can still play after lessons cease?"
- "Enjoys piano into adulthood?"

Any of these headings [show that by completing piano lessons, you] are making an **investment in [the students] musical future**. Four or more practices per week over a reasonable length of time (i.e. years) should ensure that their child will be able to sit down and tinkle at the piano as an adult, or at the very least, be of some help to their own children when they take up lessons.

### And finally, the Yes\*\* Disclaimer

There are many ex-pianists in the world. People who played at an extremely high level when they were young but cannot play a single note now. This is because practising and perfecting a Chopin Nocturne for months on end is great discipline, but that piece will disappear from the fingers once practising stops.

It's totally normal to forget how to play something; pieces just don't stay in the fingers without constant reinforcement. The only way to get pieces back, once that muscle memory is all gone, is to be able to read music effectively or to play by ear. I can no longer play any of the pieces I learned for my final recital at the Con, even though I practised them for years! But I could re-learn them quickly now if I wanted to, because I can sight-read.

The skills of sight reading (both traditionally notated pieces and chord charts), playing by ear, improvising and composing are VITAL to ensuring a relationship with the piano after lessons have stopped.

### A Customised Chart

In the Facebook threads I had said I would draw up a few different charts, for different age groups. But I've decided there is just too much to cover, and there is no single chart that all students/teachers/parents can relate to.

So, here is a template for you to fill in for your students. Fill in the Frequency, Time Spent, Reason for Lessons, and Progress columns according to your studio's needs. Then decide on your own heading in the last column, to do with retention of skills, in place of 'Long-Lasting Musical Impact'. I also encourage you to point out to your students and their parents where the 'fun zone' lies – that sweet spot of commitment that ensures maximum practice and minimum complaint!

Practices per week	Time spent per practice	Reason for lessons	Progress?	

You can download this template as a word document [here](#).  
Or, if it suits, simply download a pdf of the original chart [here](#).

### Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, no practice = no competence = no fun. The rate at which we gain competence through practice is different for every human being. It's up to teachers to help students and parents decide what amount of practice time is appropriate for them, given their individual goals, needs, ideals, and schedules.