

SLUMPS

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In the first weeks and months after your child begins playing an instrument, you're going to see tremendous progress in their playing. They will go from not really knowing which hand goes where to playing a simple tune or two in what seems like an astonishingly short period of time. Their progress will continue at that pace for several months. There will likely be a first concert or recital where your child will experience the thrill of audience applause and the further thrill of your pride in their accomplishment.

THE FIRST SLUMP

Then it will suddenly seem to you, and unfortunately to your child as well, that there has been no progress in several weeks and that nothing exciting is happening with their progress on the instrument. The reality of the situation is that there is plenty of progress going on. Your child is learning to read more and more complex notes and rhythms, expanding their range, and developing control over their instrument. The problem with this stage of development is that there is simply not as much drama in learning to play dotted rhythms as there was in going from random squawks and squeals to a passable rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

This is the first slump your child will likely experience in their musical endeavors, and it's pretty predictable. It's also not the last slump they're likely to go through. Being forewarned about the coming slump means that you can prepare accordingly. If you pay close attention to your child's practice time, to how much they talk about their lessons, and to how often they want to play things for you, you'll know when their enthusiasm starts to dip.

ADDING EXCITEMENT

You will have to create some excitement and drama by noticing the progress your child is making and encouraging them to continue. A few simple comments about how good they're sounding, or just noticing that they're playing a new piece, can go a long way in making their musical studies feel important. These comments may not seem like much to

you, but they can be a huge boost for your child as the newness of playing an instrument begins to wear off. It tells them you're listening and that you can hear their progress.

You might ask your child to play a tune for you, their grandparents, or someone else close to the family. If they decline, don't push the issue, but if they're interested, make sure it happens. The early weeks of music lessons brought such dramatic progress that you were more than likely making positive comments more often than you realized, and probably talking to others about your child's progress as well. As the newness of the instrument waned, those comments almost undoubtedly dropped off. Your child may well have interpreted the dwindling praise as lack of interest on your part, or on some failure to progress on their part. We're all energized when our work is praised, our children included.

It can also be helpful to get your child talking about their practice, what they're working on, and what their favorite piece is so far. Get them talking about their music lessons and their band or orchestra rehearsals and really listen to what they say. Talk about any upcoming performances and remember that they are going to pick up on your feelings. If you make it sound as though you are not looking forward to going to the concert or recital, or that you're just too busy to work it into your day, your child may interpret that to mean the entire endeavor doesn't matter to you. Your attention and excitement mean a lot to your child.

A NEW TUNE

This first slump can also be alleviated by the introduction of some supplemental music—something a bit more lighthearted or fun than the method books your child is using every day. Many teachers like to use a collection of pop tunes, tunes from animated films, or a collection of easy solos from the classical repertoire as the first supplemental book. Every child's taste is different and there are many books available. Adding these supplemental books periodically is a great way to challenge the student while continuing to develop their musical skills and keep them interested in practicing as well.

Another good idea for supplemental materials is a book of duets that the student and their teacher can play together. Many teachers use duet books in two ways: they assign a challenging piece for the student to practice, and they use the easier pieces in the book as sight-reading exercises to build the student's ability to read music correctly at first glance. Playing duets also increases the student's ability to hear and correct pitch problems, and to work on other ensemble skills with their teacher. In addition, there is a sense of accomplishment in playing a duet with your teacher.

APPLAUSE

Recitals are a great way to not only get past the first slump, but also past smaller slumps that will occur later. Many private lesson teachers arrange periodic recitals for their students where they are given a chance to play a piece in front of an audience, usually with some form of accompaniment. Recitals are almost always arranged so that the younger students play first, with performances increasing in complexity with each age level. The younger students get to listen to the more advanced students and see what's possible, while advanced students get a distinct sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from seeing where they started and gauging how far they've come.

Recitals also teach valuable lessons in deportment and composure. Children who play before audiences at a reasonably young age are far less likely to have difficulty addressing groups of peers later in life. The confidence to speak or appear in a public forum is a real stumbling block for many adults. Many music teachers require their students to say a few words about the piece they're about to play in order to give children the experience of speaking to an audience. Likewise, many competitions and assessment opportunities also require students to say a few words about their piece before they play.

RCM examinations provide a great motivator for a lot of students. Moving from one grade to the next in school is a big "growing up" event in a child's life. The RCM exams present the same rite of passage in a child's musical education, giving them a calendar, specific goals, and the satisfaction of passing from one level to the next with a certificate of achievement in hand.

CHALLENGES

Although there will almost certainly be times when your child doesn't want to practice, and when you are going to have to be the voice of authority on the matter, there are a few more subtle things you can do to help your child get past these low-energy times. If your child seems to be in a practice slump, talk to your child and their teacher. Your child may be feeling stressed over a school workload, or they may not be enjoying the music they're working on at the moment. Your child's private teacher can help by assigning your child different solos and supplemental materials to play. Sometimes a little instruction in improvisation or playing by ear helps reignite the child's interest.

Sometimes the issue is finding a performing ensemble that challenges your child and introduces them to a community of other players. These ensembles can range from church groups to community bands and orchestras, or youth band and orchestra programs in your city or at a nearby college or university. Summer music camps and weekend music retreats can also be quite invigorating to young players. Your child's teacher should be able to help you find something appropriate. The director of your child's school music program can also help, but tread lightly here. You don't want to sound as though you're blaming the ensemble director for your child's slump. Stress that you are looking for some extra-curricular musical activities for your child.

There will be more slumps over the course of your child's musical studies. Showing interest and taking pride in what your child has accomplished is always a good first response, as is talking to their teacher. Teachers have been through these slumps with other students in the past and will have good ideas of getting your child fired up again.