

Key Competencies

The rules are black and white when it comes to her children's piano playing, writes Helen Hayward.

This is the story of how I came to be a pushy piano parent, which is not something of which I ever thought I'd be proud. It's about my growing realisation that if I wanted my children to play the piano, I'd have to be willing to push them. Because although learning the piano has come naturally to my children, it hasn't come easily. Their achievement is real; after four plodding years they can play in school concerts with some aplomb. However, the cost to me of having been a pushy piano parent for much of that time, getting them to practise, often against their will, is just as real. Four years ago, Harry, the brother of a friend, a composer from London on a visit to Australia, came to dinner. My children, Alex and Emma, then eight and six, promptly got out Alex's violin and asked Harry to play. Impressed by a sound far superior to anything Alex had been able to produce, they were entranced.

"How," I asked Harry, when he put down the bow, "do you encourage children to play an instrument?" "That's easy," he replied. "You get them to practise every day. You make it as normal as cleaning your teeth. You make it something that you don't think about doing, that you just do." I hardly knew Harry, but I knew that he was head of music at St Paul's School in London, and that he had children himself, and so I believed him.

The following weekend I leased a piano, called the Australian Music Teachers Register, and arranged for a teacher to come to our home. And, not least, I took up the piano again myself.

The children's teacher comes every other Saturday, an arrangement that has suited us financially and time-wise. At first it was easy. Nothing too difficult was asked of Alex and Emma, who enjoyed messing about on the keys after practising. Harry, I decided, was right. Getting a child to play an instrument was no big deal. I even felt quietly smug when friends told me that their children refused to be cajoled into practising.

But then things took a turn. Alex and Emma started playing with both hands, and scales were introduced. Sharps and flats snuck on to the page, like barbed wire for unwary small fingers. Alex baulked first, crashing his hands down on the keys in despair or defiance, it was hard to tell which. Emma, taking his cue, took to whingeing – an itch or a scrape that hadn't bothered her all day suddenly demanded instant attention just before a tricky chord. I, meanwhile, took to harrumphing unbecomingly, quietly fearing defeat.

Alistair, their teacher, remained stolid and calm. "Don't do anything," he soothed. "They're just learning, and they're kids. Music takes a lifetime, and there's no real hurry." And so that's what I did: nothing. Instead, I took up knitting so that I could feign patience while sitting beside them at the piano. I bought very nice chocolate as a bribe. And Emma finished a star chart or two.

I also did something that made a real difference, at least to me. I started practising the piano with them. Not now and then when I could fit it in, as I'd been doing, but every night. After making dinner and the school lunches, I took my turn on the piano stool. Slowly, though not at first when I was rusty, I grew to long for those minutes at the piano at the end of the day. It relaxed me, not in

a lying-on-the-sofa sort of way, but through the concentration it demanded. Playing the piano didn't come easily, but it did come from a deep and attentive part of myself. Out of my desire for my children to discover music, I chanced on something that I didn't know I had been looking for, or needed.

Having a child who plays a musical instrument is, for most parents, highly desirable. Study after study demonstrates that a facility to read and play music enhances a child's cognitive ability, and directly relates to his or her mathematical acuity. However it isn't just mental agility that I've wanted for my children – or for myself. Playing music, even for 10 minutes a day, puts me in touch with my soul, with a less conscious yet highly potent part of myself (a part which the seven times table has never touched). Of course other things have this effect too; music isn't the only one, but it's an especially direct and powerful one.

And yet learning to read notes, just like learning to read words, simply is difficult. There is no easy path, no quick bribe that imprints E flat on your brain (and I still find reading notes above and below the stave an effort). This is where the tricky part of learning music lies. You have to want to play music enough to overcome the difficulties of learning it. You have to want to do it just that much more than you recoil from the effort of coordinating your brain and fingers with the keys.

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Some children get over this hump by themselves, but many need a lot of 'encouragement'. My mother never pushed me over this hump. She was good enough to drive me to lessons before school, and to sit patiently in the car for a good few years, but she never pushed, bribed or cajoled me into regular hump-breaking practice. I had to do this for myself much later, after Alex was born, when I decided to take it up again.

Yesterday, Alex and Emma played in an informal school music concert, an event they take part in once a term, and a favour kindly bestowed by an encouraging school music teacher, that is an alternative to their sitting formal exams. Alex, first on the program, was late back from sport. As soon as he saw me, he launched into how sick he felt, how unprepared he was, refusing outright to play for an audience until he could play his piece without faltering.

The school music teacher ushered us into a practice room. Alex's first attempt at Handel's 'The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba' went well, rippling through the twiddly bits with dexterity well beyond my own. The second time he stumbled at every other bar, and again told me that he wouldn't play. At that moment, I remembered Harry's words

of four years ago, and took a deep breath. "Alex," I said, "you'll be fine. Just play the piece and move on. It doesn't matter if you make mistakes. The audience will be impressed that you're even attempting such a demanding piece."

In that split second, strengthened by Harry's words, I decided to be a pushy piano parent. I decided not to bribe Alex, not to sweeten what he had to do, nor to let him get out of playing. "Look Alex," I said, "if you can do this, there's nothing more tricky that you'll have to face in the years ahead. There will be lots of things that are as difficult as this, but they won't be more difficult." And I finished with a phrase lifted straight from the pushy parent's songbook: "And I know that you can do it".

Without looking back, I switched out the light in the practice room and headed for the auditorium, leaving Alex to follow. Walking on to the stage, he sat down and played Handel with a determination he rarely shows at home, biting his lower lip and staring hard at the notes. He played fast and slow, just as his aunt had told him the

