

The Changing Role of the Parent - EXAMPLE

This essay examines how the role of the Suzuki parent changes, starting from the pre-twinkle stage through to the end of Book 3.

- **Entering the Suzuki family**

Before a parent even begins Suzuki lessons for their child, there is a great deal of education needed to help the parent understand the role that they will play throughout their child's Suzuki journey.

Not least, it is helpful them to be shown the Suzuki triangle, to help them visualise how their role is just as important as that of the child and teacher.

Parents in the Suzuki method are essentially the 'home-teacher'. They should be advised about the importance of taking notes at lessons, as it is during these sessions that the teacher guides the parent through the techniques for teaching the child at home. To carry out this role effectively, there needs to be commitment from the parent to practice WITH the child. It is a very hands-on role, and having the opportunity to observe other children's lessons and meet with other parents so that they can gain a deeper understanding of what their involvement will be should not be understated.

Many Suzuki schools even take the time to educate and teach the parent for some time before the child begins their learning. Suzuki traditionally taught parents for 6 months with the child observing, whereas today, more modern approaches focus on parent education for a matter of weeks. Often parents are taught how to stand, sing, clap, bow, play and twinkle, alongside receiving education around how to instill positivity in practice, encourage, nurture and take notes at lessons.

As a Suzuki parent myself, and having entered the Suzuki family with a child of 2.5 years, you cannot underestimate the level of involvement and encouragement that is required by the parent. The skills of positivity, encouragement and praise are so important and an area that parents need a lot of support with from teachers, as the home environment, without the teacher there, can present parents with numerous challenges to overcome.

Personally, prior to commencing lessons, I like to provide parents with a short written summary about the Suzuki method, meet with them to answer questions, and offer them the opportunity to observe me teach.

- **Pre-twinkle**

Typically, a child might enter the pre-twinkle stage around 4 years old. In my case, we began when my daughter was 2.5 years old, but I have also known it to be as late as 7 or 8 years old.

The pre-twinkle stage is probably the most important phase for parent involvement, when all of the core basic components of violin playing are put in place – posture, bow hold, left hand position etc. It is for this reason that the role of the parent is the most hands-on.

The challenge for the parent at home is not only to ensure that each technical development point is carried out exactly as prescribed by the teacher, but also to maintain regular daily practice at home alongside everyday home life and other commitments, and to make practice fun, so that momentum is maintained. From experience, this in itself can be more challenging than carry out the practice tasks themselves.

During pre-twinkle, the parent needs to understand how to set up a violin, how to make a bow hold, where to position the violin, how much bow to use, what a good left hand shape looks like. Often it is helpful for the parent to be taught these things themselves by the teacher at the lesson, so that they can feel each aspect and gain a deeper understanding in order to help their child at home. Young children often benefit from this too in that they enjoy making a game of seeing whether they can perform a task better than their parent.

The relationship between parent and teacher needs to be such that the parent feels free to ask questions if they don't understand something, and to be able to ask for support where they need. This might be to help structure practice sessions at home, or to seek alternative methods of motivating their child.

- **Book 1**

As children progress through Book 1, the role of the parent remains very much hands-on and to some extent, my own experience is that the parent's ability to inspire and motivate becomes even more important. As the initial excitement of starting a new instrument passes, and progression through the pieces introduces techniques that the child may start to find more challenging, the need for the parent to keep enthusiasm and motivation high becomes incredibly important. This is where the ability of the parent to make learning fun, and enjoyable is essential, something which parents may not have been expecting to have to do before they started the Suzuki journey.

Even if children spent a year working towards their twinkles, they may still spend another year or two completing the rest of Book 1, during which time, although the parent role does not change considerably, the parent should be starting to encourage the child to take some small steps towards being responsible for their own practice in preparation for later life.

At this age, tasks set by the parent should be age appropriate such as asking the child to get their own violin out and ready, asking them which variation they want to warm up with, inviting them to choose a review piece, choosing a piece for a concert from a list, asking them to correct a 'mistake' made by the teacher etc.

Throughout Book 1, the parents will still be involved heavily in practice sessions, encouraging and guiding, but they may find that the child now starts to develop a little more independence in their practice as they don't need to be reminded what to practice, they know from their lessons and listening to their own playing, about what it is they need to work on. This in itself can provide challenge to the parent as the notes that the parent has from the teacher, may differ from what the child thinks they need to work on.

As children progress through Book 1, the parent also has an important role to play in ensuring that effective review takes place. It is helpful if parents understand that the technique within a new piece can mostly be tracked back to earlier pieces, which is why keeping earlier pieces under review and polished, helps the overall technical progression of the child.

During this phase parents will continue to play an active role in their local Suzuki community too, attending group lessons, concerts, playtogethers and workshops, all of which should be encouraged by the teacher as not only does it motivate and inspire the child, but it also enables the parent to connect with other parents, share ideas and experiences.

- **Book 2**

As children begin Book 2, many parents may feel that the child is starting to understand more about playing the violin and reading music than they do, causing them to feel that they should

step back from practice. However, the teacher needs to explain that the parent still has a vital role to play during lessons and practice, but that the role may change slightly.

As with Book 1, the parent can start to introduce some choices for the child during practice sessions, but these should still be fairly restricted in that the child should not be choosing what they want to practice, the practice should still follow the points set by the teacher. The parent may give the child choices about whether they want to do review at the beginning or end of the lesson, if they want to review the whole of Book 1 or a set list of pieces etc.

The role of the parent continues to be to offer encouragement and praise, to ensure a consistent practice regime, to ensure regular listening to the cd, and to offer support and understanding when point of difficulty present themselves.

During Book 2, the teacher may begin to prepare the family for the child practising on their own. Because the parent has been so instrumental to the process for so long, it is not just a case of preparing the child for independent practice, but also preparing the parent. For some, stepping back from the practice regime may be a difficult task as they have been so vital to it up until now.

Things the teacher may do are set the child a simple study that they could work on independently and then go and show the parent. With this task, the parent needs to be guided that it is not about the child getting the study right; it is simply about starting to change the relationship. Alternatively, the teacher may encourage the child to carry out some review work while their parent is not in the room – perhaps when they are preparing dinner, so that the parent can hear what is going on, but they are not directly involved.

- **Book 3**

Throughout Book 3, the parent's role is likely to continue in a similar way as it did through Book 2. Whilst still attending lessons, making notes and leading practice at home, there should continue to be a slight stepping back, to allow the child to build their own independence and self-motivation.

Despite taking small steps towards independent practice, the parent should not in any way feel that their role is any less important. It is just different. During Book 3, the child will start to learn more advanced techniques such as vibrato and shifting, and as with the introduction of any new technique, they will still need support and encouragement from their parent throughout their practice. Obviously the support the parent shows will now just be in a different form to that which they exhibited during the pre-twinkle stage, given the advancing age of the child.

As children grow up their interests change and they will want to try new things and do the things their friends are doing. Children should never be discouraged from expanding their horizons; therefore a new challenge for the parent will be ensuring a balance between other interests and the violin, so that neither is neglected. Here the parent has an important job of setting an example and showing that interest in, and commitment to, the violin need not waver when other interests are introduced.

By this time, having been a Suzuki parent for many years, and having listened to the cds and many concerts and playtogethers, it may be possible for parents who originally described themselves as 'un-musical' to begin to offer support by means of appraising their child's playing and discussing ideas about creativity and expression, allowing the relationship to enter a more mature phase of musical appraisal and appreciation.

- **Summary**

What is clear is that throughout the Suzuki journey, the role of the parent is absolutely fundamental, as it is in life. Whilst the role of the parent inevitably changes as the child progresses through the repertoire, in no way does it become any less significant, it simply changes and adapts to best support the child at that particular point in time.