

A Parent's Guide to Practicing Smart™

by Dr. Joseph Line

“Talent is the desire to practice”

*Malcolm Gladwell*¹

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, speaking on Fareed Zakaria's GPS on CNN 4.12.2009 about his book, "The Outliers: The Story of Success." Little, Brown and Company, New York, NY 2008. In this book, Gladwell makes note of research that seems to indicate that for a person to become expert at any endeavor, 10,000 hours of practice will be needed.

Author's Note

What is Practicing Smart™?

Practicing Smart™ is a series of three books written to address the most common and the most confusing challenges faced by amateur pianists: how to practice effectively and efficiently. The books are the result of my more than 45 years as a private piano instructor, performer, and university professor, and the study of hundreds of scientific articles and research documents on how the human brain functions.

Originally developed as a practicing guide for young novice pianists ages 6 and above, it soon became apparent to me that the Practicing Smart™ method works equally well for novices of any age and for more advanced pianists too.

The three books in the series are:

- **Practicing Smart™® for Children.** This is a children's book that outlines the Practicing Smart™ steps in words and pictures youngsters can understand.
- **A Parent's Guide to Practicing Smart™.** This book provides in-depth explanations of the how and why of each smart piano practicing step. It is most useful for parents of young piano students and for practicing partners – adults who assist a child through the practicing process. Novice adult pianists and more advanced youngsters will also find in this book a complete and systematic guide for learning any piece of music.
- **Practicing Smart™®: Putting Scientific Theory into Practice.** Any person that wants to explore the scientific theories behind the Practicing Smart™® methodology will find this a fascinating read.

Practicing Smart™ is a piano practicing framework whose underlying structure and methodology are deeply rooted in the efficient use of the brain and of its memory systems. To put it plainly: The Practicing Smart™ method is very brain friendly and it can work for students of all ages and abilities.

None of the individual steps of the Practicing Smart™ method are particularly new. What is new is how the various steps are precisely ordered, so that the brain can work efficiently and learning is increased and enhanced throughout the process.

Each part of the Practicing Smart™ process contains several steps. Some steps can be accomplished quickly; others will take a bit longer and involve more concentrated effort. But the investment of time and energy at the right moments will be well worth it in the end.

All three of the Practicing Smart™ books and Practicing Smart™ products are the result of over 10 years of writing and research on my part. Although writing these books was a labor of love, dedicated to my piano students and to piano students the world over, it is also the way I make a living for myself and my family. Do not photocopy or duplicate any part of this book without express written consent. Not only is such copying a violation of American and international copyright laws but, as a moral issue, it is just plain wrong and amounts to theft.

Introduction

What Practicing Is and Isn't

“For starters, it isn't what most of us do when we're practicing.”

*Geoff Colvin*²

If you or your child have not yet begun piano lessons, it is highly probable that what you think practicing will be like is not even close to what practicing really is. And chances are, if you have already begun piano study, most of what you have been thinking is practicing, really isn't practicing.

How do I know that?

Because in over 45 years as a private piano instructor and coach, I have watched as all of my students struggle day to day with the “practicing dilemma,” - as one adult student called it. I have seen that, if left to their own devices, most amateur piano students, children and adults, accomplish only a small fraction of what is possible in the time they spend practicing piano.

Why?

Because sitting a child down at the piano in a room by themselves and expecting them to figure out how to practice the piano is an exercise in futility. It frustrates the child, it frustrates the parents, and most often leads to the child quitting piano study within a year or two. Indeed, there are legions of piano quitters of all ages and from almost every country who have never realized their dream to play the piano well. It's not that they lack ability, but

² Colvin, Geoff. “Talent is Overrated: What *Really* Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else. Portfolio p. 65.

simply that they didn't know any of the fundamental principles of practicing. And unless you or your child are studying with a piano teacher who understands in depth the vagaries of piano practicing and can show you a simple, logical, and complete plan for practicing that *really* works, you are wasting not only your time but also your money.

Many years ago, I came across a quote by the famous golfer, Bobby Jones. He once observed, "Golf is played mainly on a five-and-a-half-inch course ... the space between your ears."

Being an avid golfer as well as a musician, it made sense to me that the same could also be said of musicians in general and pianists in particular. Although many people think golf is about swinging a golf club and piano is about pressing some keys on a keyboard, Bobby Jones' wise observation was that there is something far more fundamental at play. That's because any measure of success in either piano playing or golf is determined, to a large degree, by what the player knows - the skills and knowledge they've acquired over time, and by what is going on inside their head while practicing or performing.

Most amateur pianists don't think much about how their mind works or how their brain functions.³ But what I have learned over the years is that our ability to hear, to see, to touch, to think, to move, and to remember are all due to the brain's incredible ability to process tremendous amounts of information from all kinds of sources outside and inside our body. But as amazing as the human brain is, it does have limits: limits on how much new information can be processed at one time, and limits on how quickly its biological resources can be mustered to develop the skills needed to play a piece of music successfully. And it is these limits which will confound any pianist unless they are known and dealt with. As author and psychologist David Chapman puts it, "It is possible to overwork or over extend our brain just as it is possible to overwork the rest of our body."⁴

³ Many people use the words brain and mind interchangeably, but here they have different meanings. The word "brain" refers to the organ of the central nervous system that is enclosed in the skull. I use the word "mind" much as psychologists do to refer to the conscious and unconscious cognitive processes of the brain: thought, perception, memory, imagination, emotion and so forth.

⁴ Chapman (2015) 58.

Recent research by cognitive neuroscientists⁵ shows that **how** piano playing information is fed into a pianist's brain, that is, **how** the music is practiced, will determine whether the music will be learned quickly and retained or simply forgotten in a matter of minutes. Yes. MINUTES! And so, understanding what works and what doesn't when it comes to learning a piece of music has a direct bearing on practicing success or failure, how efficiently the brain will function, and on how long it will take to learn and master any piece of music.

The real day-to-day “nitty gritty” of practicing the piano involves deep concentration, lots of repetition (rehearsing), correcting frequent errors, playing sections of music out of sequence, problem solving, stopping and starting, trial and error, and lots of experimentation. To those who don't understand the rigors of practicing or have never watched a professional pianist practice, the whole practicing process might seem to be chaotic, tedious at times, lacking in any kind of formal structure or rules, and devoid of common sense.

But piano practicing has a logic all its own – even though this logic might seem counterintuitive to many. Underneath all the seeming chaos of practicing are some fundamental principles that are critical to practicing success. There are also some very important practicing techniques and tools that every pianist needs to have to solve the varied and unique challenges of myriad musical styles. And though piano practicing is not excessively rule bound, there are clearly some practicing habits which work and others which do not.

Practicing Smart™ works!

⁵ Cognitive neuroscientists are scientists who use advanced real-time imaging technologies (fMRIs – functional magnetic resonance imaging) to understand the conscious and unconscious process of the brain: thought, perception, memory, imagination, emotion, behavior etc.

Chapter 1

Practicing Partners

Tell me and I'll forget;
Show me and I may remember;
Involve me and I'll understand
Chinese Proverb

Young students need a practicing partner to guide them through the Practicing Smart™® process at home and to reinforce what has been taught in their lessons. Here's an example of how this might work.

DeSheena (*a beginning piano student practicing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"*)

Nathan (*her dad watching her practice*): Is that how Dr. Joe wanted you to play using the tips of your fingers?

DeSheena: I'm not sure. (*Makes a change in her finger position.*) Does this look right?

Nathan: That does look better. Did he also want you to use more arm motion?

DeSheena: I tried, but I keep missing so many notes that way.

Nathan: Well, I bet if you keep trying to use more arm, you'll get better at it and soon you won't be missing so many notes.

DeSheena: I guess so. I'll try.

Nathan: That a girl. I love it when you try like this. Someday maybe you'll be able to play lots of really cool songs.

Who are the ideal practicing partners? Parents, relatives, or some other significant person who has a positive impact on the child's life (preferably an adult). Practicing partners must be willing to attend lessons with the student, and work with them at home while they are practicing. Practicing partners need not have any prior piano or musical training. But if they do have training, so much the better.

Shawna (*Billy's mom, who is not a pianist – calling from the kitchen while cooking dinner*):

Is that right, Billy?

Billy (*practicing piano in the next room*): Yeh, mom. It's right.

Shawna: Are you sure, Billy?

Billy: I'm sure, mom.

Shawna: I don't know. That doesn't sound quite right to me. Maybe you should check the notes again.

Billy: OK. *(He checks the notes.)* Hey Mom. I found a wrong note. How does this sound now?

Shawna: Much better. Wow, that's neat how you found that wrong note and corrected it all by yourself.

Practice partners are necessary because most young novice pianists don't stay at the piano long enough or know how to concentrate fully. They often skip steps they think are unimportant or give up too easily trying to solve a practicing problem. That's normal in today's fast-paced world. But it's up to parents or practicing partners to keep them on track, because the full value of each Practicing Smart™® step is designed to be felt across the entire learning process.

Practicing is a creative process that stretches over days and sometime weeks. What is learned during one practicing day needs to be remembered and carried over into the next practicing day and the next and the next. Skipping steps, taking short cuts or not practicing daily not only lowers the student's understanding of the music they are working on, but also undercuts the foundation of the whole creative process.

What do practicing partners to do? During lessons, practice partners should remain silent and observe and absorb what is being taught. Questions for the teacher should be kept at a minimum and asked only after the lesson is over. Partners should sit close enough to the student and teacher to be able to see and hear exactly what is being taught.

After a lesson, practicing partners should concern themselves only with helping the student establish good Practicing Smart™® habits and showing them how to set and meet their practicing goals. They should not, as the following story shows, act as the student's surrogate teacher.

Several years ago, a distinguished professional pianist, came to me because her 6-year old daughter Erin screamed at her every time she tried to help her practice. I suggested to her that instead of trying to teach her daughter how to play the piano between lessons, she should just help her daughter achieve the goals I had set during the lesson. "But she's making so many mistakes when she practices," she

said. "I can't just let those go, can I?" "Yes, you can," I said. "And you must. Don't try to fix her errors. That's my job. You are her mommy, not her teacher. And it is confusing her at this age when you step across the line from being her mommy to being her teacher. Let her fail, if she must. I'll pick up the pieces during her lessons. But for now, your job is to be her mommy and a good practicing partner by gently guiding her through her weekly goals."

When the next lesson came a week later, I helped Erin correct her errors. It didn't take long. Then I turned to her mom and asked her how that week had gone at home "So much better!" she said with a great sigh of relief. "She didn't scream at me even once. I guess I thought with all my piano teaching experience I should be able to help accelerate her progress. But I guess I was just getting in the way." I just smiled, because I knew I had once made the same mistake with my own son!

Unfortunately, it is rare in this country for a parent or practicing partner to sit attentively with children during lessons and practicing. But my experience has been that young students progress three to five times faster when there is a partner who sits through their lessons and then guides them through their practicing routines at home. What's more, students who have not had a practicing partner guide them during the early years of practicing are much more likely to quit after only a few years of study. What parent wants that for their children?

Once I had two six-year old students begin piano lessons at about the same time. They were from different families but both kids seemed equally bright and excited about learning to play the piano. After about two months of piano lessons, I noticed that one child's progress began to slow considerably while the other child had rocketed forward. Even though both children's parents attended their lessons I searched for a way to explain the difference in their progress. One child was already half way through learning the eighth piece in the Suzuki Piano Method Book 1, while the other was still lingering on the second piece. What could explain this difference? When I spoke to the parent of the child who was progressing so slowly, I learned that because both parents were working full-time jobs, they never had the time to sit with their child and help him through his practicing routine. He was left to practice on his own. Fortunately, there was another child of high school age in the family. Even though he had never studied piano, he was willing to help his younger brother with his practicing. Although he couldn't make his brother's lessons, the parents agreed to share with him what had gone on in the lessons so he could help his younger brother. It worked! Soon this boy's progress accelerated quickly matching the progress of the other boy.

It is important that practicing partners refrain from showing or telling their child what to do while practicing at home. Instead, they should ask appropriate questions of the child to get them to think creatively, like in the first two short stories above. This is the best

way to help them develop and discover ways to solve their own practicing challenges⁶. It's the old fish adage put to good use: Give me a fish and I eat for a day; teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime. Or ... Show me how to solve a problem, and that problem is solved just for today. Guide me to solve problems for myself, and I learn how to solve my own problems for the rest of my life.

As students mature and begin to apply what they have learned without being prompted, the burden of responsibility should shift gradually toward the student and away from the practicing partner or parent. Most students will have the sequence of Practicing Smart™® steps memorized in very little time. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they will do all the steps completely. Keep in mind the child's age and maturity. If they can show that they are able to do all the Practicing Smart™® steps consistently and completely, then the practicing partner's responsibility need only be to ensure that appropriate goals are set each day and all the steps are carried out.

The reward for Practicing Smart™® is a substantial increase in the personal fulfillment and enjoyment of music and music making, but also the assurance that with each new piece of music learned successfully, the student pianist grows in overall musical skill, musicianship, and practicing efficiency.

⁶ This teaching strategy is called "Socratic Questioning." To read more about Socratic Questioning, see Appendix A near the end of this book.