

## Lesson Buddies have time Built-in Motivation

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Even students who love to play, who like their teachers, learn easily, feel appreciated, perform freely, and play beautifully can announce that they have “no time” for lessons.

**Students who have “lesson buddies” are more likely to keep going with lessons** even through teenaged years filled with other interests. They “have time” for lessons and practice. It’s part of the social world they live in, and thrive in.

Lesson buddies, lesson partners, are music friends in a circle of support. They all belong to each other’s time and space, like dancers having dance lessons in a group.

**They look forward to seeing each other in their weekly individual lesson group**, master class style. These students ride in a stream of motivation, an enduring motivation to continue individual lessons, in the stream with their lesson buddies. Their lesson group is a small society within the greater society of all the students.

Students and parents get to know each other in this close setting. Parents share stories, kids share energy. Sometimes a kid will get specially attached to someone else’s parent in the group. Interlocking relationships help all of us sail along together, reinforcing our mutual efforts, building everyone’s abilities. **The secret is the Suzuki circle around each Suzuki triangle.**

Dr. Shin’ichi Suzuki, acute observer of people and how they learn, cautioned us to remember that for children’s learning, OTHER CHILDREN are most important. **Children watch children.** Of course, we adults set up the environment, and we teachers direct the learning. Of course the parent-child relationship and the parent-child-teacher triangle relationships are the basis of life and learning. But we have to remember that even when we have a wonderful student-teacher relationship, **children are motivated by each OTHER.** Parents sometimes assume that an all-alone lesson will accomplish more. We see that in the long run, to keep students studying forever, the group is the best motivator.

Older students are motivated by each other. Adult students are motivated by each other. The positive-approach, loving, individual lesson group helps everyone including the teacher to achieve the most. College students need this support group too, to keep up their courage and interest in continuing to work. They become music friends, lesson buddies, lesson partners. They need to feel they are part of a society that wants them in it, that NEEDS them in it, that appreciates them, and that rewards them with the pleasure of developing their abilities to the highest level in being able to learn from watching each other’s individual lessons, OPEN LESSONS. **Camaraderie (not competition) creates courage, creativity, and energy for further focused effort.**

**This system makes teaching easier for the teacher.** Important lesson points can be demonstrated to the student at hand **while the whole room watches and learns.** Even when students are “on” different pieces, we’re all working toward playing with ease, natural ringing tone, and natural musical expression, in any repertoire and any exercise. We can all learn from every lesson. We cheer each other on, and appreciate every little achievement, and are sympathetic with the struggles. **We feel included** in the sharing of our knowledge, our practice, and our playing, strengthened and inspired, excited (not afraid that the others are “better”, getting ahead, learning more, treated differently) because we totally know what’s going on. **We share** all our tips, our ups and downs, all our “secrets” to success.

We Suzuki teachers are in the same boat, and share everything, teaching each other. This is Suzuki’s way, to have OPEN LESSONS and OPEN TEACHING.

(Imagine instead if the “next” student is waiting outside the room, or in the car, not allowed to see or hear each valuable instruction, missing it. When the current lesson ends and that person leaves and the next student enters, the teacher has to explain common points again to a separate person all alone, each time all over again for each new person, when instead EVERYONE could have benefited from the first demonstrations and move further in the processes together. What a waste of time, energy, and possibilities the “private lesson” is! And demoralizing by its secrecy).

Sometimes families join different individual lesson groups, and get close to a new set of people, keeping their friendships with the former group. Kids in my studio may come to watch each other even when it's not their own lesson group. When this is on the same day as their own lesson, they may "stay all day", as they know they are welcome, and they're comfortable. The ones being watched feel honored and appreciated.

In Matsumoto, Japan at Dr. Suzuki's Talent Education (Ability Development) Institute "Saino Kyoiku Kaikan", for his lessons, people would have a "lesson DAY". When I was there four months in 1976, after lunch on Tuesdays, the foreigners "gaijin" would all come to Dr. Suzuki's teaching studio together, and stay for hours watching him teach each one, including at some point themselves. He'd address everyone in the room in his comments. It was an atmosphere of SUPPORT and APPRECIATION. Everyone would learn from watching everyone else's efforts, Dr. Suzuki's choosing of the important focus point ("one point"), his demonstrations, his playing along, his psychology in action, his one point assignment for practice, and the next week's results. They'd all see each other's lessons, and the next week see what had changed, and Dr. Suzuki's further instruction. (Imagine if instead he saw people one by one, with their having no knowledge of the other lessons. What a waste that would have been).

One lesson day, a teacher trainee whom we'd often see cry in her lessons with Dr. Suzuki was helped immensely by Dr. Suzuki's hands-on action. We all saw this, and it was a revelation. I often think we were all so lucky to witness this together and learn something important.

She would cry in fear, frustration, self doubt, and lack of confidence, I assumed, even though Dr. Suzuki was kindly encouraging and providing her clearly with the "one point" she needed to practice that would help her forward. In the US maybe she'd have been sent to a psychiatrist to talk about her problems. "Talk therapy".

At this particular individual lesson, Dr. Suzuki picked up his violin and started to play along with her, a usual part of his lessons. Then he started to go a little faster, and she had to keep up with him. He went faster yet, and faster, she trying to keep up with him, watching each other, he drove her faster and faster impossibly faster 'til she burst out laughing!

Dr. Suzuki broke her through her clouds into the sunshine.

We ALL felt relief WITH her. And further amazed at his wisdom and method. Action therapy.

Certain little students in my studio get especially attached to certain big ones (seen in lessons and recitals) who are not part of their personal individual lesson group, and ask to have lessons WITH them. Sometimes we can find a time to do this for a special lesson and they're thrilled. (If we can't work out the timing for a totally joint lesson, one'll come to visit the other's lesson.) They watch and bask in mutual admiration, and perhaps play together at my two side-by-side Kawai grand pianos.

When one of my students learned to play a traditional Iranian folksong (brought by her father), her lesson buddies (who were not Iranian) naturally learned it too, including a parent. Two lesson buddy boys developed a whole routine with "Take Five", improvising at two pianos, complete with dark glasses. All this fun and synergy fueled their serious study of delicacy and ornaments in Haydn and Mozart Sonatas.

Parents sometimes get lesson time in our individual lesson group, at first to be able to help their children. Parents give each other courage and encouragement, with the kids all ears. They can even keep going through the Suzuki repertoire, and also bring in other music they long to learn (as do the kids) from Gershwin to Great Balls of Fire. The enrichment benefits everyone. One parent's shoulders kept going up, another parent's heels were coming up. Their lesson partner parents helped them notice. Students can SEE principles of posture in the other students better than in themselves whom they cannot fully see, and can hear musical expression developing in the other students. The musicality of my high school lesson partner inspires me to this day. (Imagine if all are, instead, alone in a "private" lesson, what a loss of opportunities.)

Little students see other students' little hands and can relate to these better than the to teacher's big old hands. One of my little students once said to me, "You have old hands!" This stopped me in my tracks. It made me look at my hands as THEY do. I ask them to learn by watching my hands. I now check that my hands are more worthy of their attention (use lotion and gloves), and more importantly I make sure they can **see the little hands of their lesson partners** doing what I want **them** to do, not just MY big old hands! **Little hands can more easily imitate similar little hands.**

A student will start lessons only after having listened at home humming all of Book One (ask me to email you the article "Call Back when you're humming all of Book One"), THEN observed a lesson group for at least a few weeks until the student is actively ASKING for lessons: "When is MY turn?" While in the pre-lesson observing stage, they're already becoming part of the individual lesson group, becoming comfortable with people around, learning to notice good sound, alive playing, healthy body use. And WANTING to be in lessons and practice.

Ask yourself what are your true long-term goals for lessons. For me, they're to keep lighting the fire of enthusiasm every week while developing our listening and playing abilities. If someone were looking in the window of my small studio, with two grand pianos side by side, a student at one, me at the other, or maybe students at each piano, lots of music materials on the floor and walls, maybe a big ball or two being used, and four to ten people watching, listening and doing variously, it might not be the picture they expect of a serious piano lesson, which it totally is, a serious piano lesson with the highest goals of wonderful musicianship forever.

I tell my students they can stand up and move if they need to in order to be able to see what's happening at the piano lesson, making sure everyone else can still see too. I want everyone to see what is happening with the hands on the keys, as well as hear the instructions and the music. The room is alive. They can move, lay on the floor, couch, balls.

I have three big body exercise balls of different sizes and colors (red, green, yellow) for stretching and relaxing. Kids, parents, and teacher enjoy their healthful and creative possibilities with good feelings. (Sometimes for a while parents are scared of the balls). My adjacent, open living room houses the other big balls, which come and go.

Sometimes I put a big ball BEHIND the student sitting at the piano so they can lean back to stretch backwards, and relax, opening the chest. It gives the student, when needed, a refreshing break to their concentration at the keyboard, where I am totally demanding and relentless (always nice about it and reasonable too, in positive approach) even while the rest of the room is rather free.

When students have "book concerts" and "graduation concerts" in each other's homes, and all the families are invited, there's further bonding. At more formal recitals of all the students, the kids and parents are already bonded, know each other, feel like a family, and are generally relaxed. They enjoy performing. They enjoy watching each other, big and little. The parents appreciate every little step forward (and the troubles) in the other kids' playing abilities, in a sympathetic family way, like aunts and uncles. The kids relate to each other like cousins.

**Our Suzuki summer camps, institutes and workshops are an even bigger extended family, a special support group we look forward to living in,** which can motivate the kids all year. My kids will practice all year to be ready to play for their Blue Lake Suzuki Family Camp friends and teachers whom they see in June. They look forward to seeing their old camp friends. It's like a family reunion. (We teachers also look forward to seeing the same kids, and new ones, and each other – motivating us too). The kids make new friends who become old friends. To get to go to Blue Lake, they have to keep their studies going. We had one Blue Lake family from Ohio who, every summer, went to **several** Suzuki institutes in North America. Imagine how many music friends they developed, while learning from many teachers!

The individual lesson groups at camp have a festive air, an exciting congregating of families together to share Suzuki music making and growth. These summer institutes always have the same masterclass format for individual lessons that we need to have for our HOME lessons- the individual lesson group (not "private").

**Kids who always come all alone for individual lessons, even with parents,** may be less likely to have that motivating feeling of being part of an eternal sweep forward in their individual study. The continuing threads may become weaker, vulnerable, fraying, breaking. Especially with older students whose peer affiliation may be their strongest motivator, the excitement and fun of all together in the individual lesson group strengthen the fabric, and are reinforcement for continuing motivation to study.

**If you have students who want to quit, who have "no time" for lessons and practice, do ask yourself** if they have loving lesson partners they look forward to seeing and enjoy being with, who provide needed motivation and whose lessons they are part of, open every week to learn from. Do they have a strong peer group in their individual lesson work?

Ask yourself if students' individual lessons are with other students in a totally positive environment. Ask me to email you the latest version of the article "Approach Positive as babywalk talk". Ask if they have lesson partners with whom they share pleasures of music and musical development, each week safely learning by watching, enjoying and appreciating each other's individual work at the instrument, in camaraderie, learning together, **SHARING their discoveries and accomplishments** in mutual support.

Ask if they have lesson partners who cheer them on, and who miss them if they're absent. Ask if they have "fun" with their lesson partners, with happy feelings which make them look forward to seeing each other each week in their efforts toward further and further musical development in their playing, tone development, ease of playing, in their repertoire, "review" and "new", in their reading skills, their scales and arpeggios, in their performing.

Ask if the individual lesson group is like a tight loving sports team where each member feels a part of each other member's learning and achievements, in practice sessions together, enjoying and learning from each other's individual work and play.

How to do this individual lesson group? It's a matter of attitude and expectation. Haruko Kataoka, co-developer of the Suzuki Piano Method, and (Suzuki) Piano Basics, said, "**Suzuki teachers work for impact; we're not selling blocks of time**".

Hockey tournaments can take all weekend. One of my family groups, parents and kids, settles into my studio for example at 4, and **expects to stay maybe two hours**, leaving around 6. Sometimes after two hours, the kids have gotten their second wind, and keep staying! Sometimes the parents have to drag them out.

**What happens in those two or so hours?** Families are all living in the studio environment. They make it their own. If everyone is in rapt attention the whole time, observing every moment of the teaching and playing, this synergy enhances everyone's experience. Sometimes during one person's individual work, others work with the music materials. Little ones sit **under** the pianos for an awesome sound experience. The music lesson is still absorbed even if kids do math homework during another student's individual lesson.

A blind student of mine, when not on the piano bench, jumps to the beat. Two girls who've become fast lesson friends secretly prepare little plays, or write letters to each other. Still they are in the environment together and hear the lessons. We all still benefit from this togetherness in many ways. **They all come together, leave together. It's lessons together** (not just come early or stay late for someone else's lesson). **Open lessons**, together lessons are forever!

While it's good to group students of the same level and age, anything can work. A 5-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl can still be fascinated with each other. Any group is better than none.

Families know they are welcome to bring both parents, grandparents, stepparents, and friends. Siblings feel included. **The more the merrier, one big happy family.** These kids are comfortable performing because every lesson is with lots of eyes and bodies near them. It becomes normal. They're used to it. This social music experience provides them lots of opportunity to develop their focus, concentration, poise, naturalness, ease, freedom, and sense of normalness, and fun in playing for others.

Whoever walks into my house when I have students gets asked to stay in the studio while someone performs. My daughters' friends, a delivery person, carpenter, my husband's students, whoever enters the door becomes part of the audience at least for a minute. I introduce everyone to everyone, and boom! you have an expanded social group. The kids are totally used to performing for anyone. I may also invite the sudden guests to themselves PLAY. Sometimes they do! Surprises are fun; fun adds fuel to lesson work.

Once I had a little boy student who was so comfortable with many eyes upon him in his lessons, that one day, when everyone else was sick or away, and he was for the first time alone in his lesson, he wouldn't play! Even though his mother was there! Luckily a neighbor girl was playing on the sidewalk, so I asked her to come in to keep him company in his lesson. She was delighted to come in to see what was going on. He was happy and had a nice lesson.

Our students can play for anybody (no fear) and anytime (and don't "need their book" like some of their friends who take "traditional" lessons, who, when they come over, and I ask them to play for us, can't play because they don't have their book). This relaxed attitude toward performing, along with loads of listening at home, lessons, and recitals, with effective daily home practice, makes these kids enjoy our frequent recitals (not fear them).

Some kids who for the first time walk into my studio for lessons at whatever age are already nervous people for whatever reason (home atmosphere probably). And sometimes when kids get to be around nine or ten, even with all our positive approach and lesson group love, they start to feel nervous in recitals. I think it's something about growing up and being more self-conscious.

So we practice saying "whoops, uh-oh, and oh well", so that if their playing hits a snag, they'll be able to just keep trying (not give up in tears and humiliation).

Also from the beginning of lessons, every lesson, before sitting at the piano, standing facing each other, we do stretching and swinging "exercises", preceded by our very conscious bow and breathing relaxation and focus exercise. FIRST we stand before each other and look into each other's eyes. We do slow, slow in-breath, hold, then slow, slow out-breath, at least three times, looking into each other's eyes, expressing our developing respect and trust.

The in-breath helps us stretch our back straight up, the out-breath helps us "let go" of shoulders, jaw, eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, ears, nose, elbows, stomach, whatever, one at a time, in groups, or all at once, however is needed. We might take ten or more breaths to achieve all the "letting go", relaxing. Sometimes someone will develop a tension while playing, say, tensing their mouth. So we focus on letting go of the mouth in our pre-piano exercises so that at the piano we can easily remind mouth to stay loose even throughout the playing efforts.

Then we bow, bending down long enough to say, "thank you very much". We return to standing, staying long enough to look again into each other's eyes and say "sound, spirit, touch" and "hippopotamus". Thus our bow has an ABA form, giving us special focus for each of the three sections.

After this quiet focusing, a kind of meditation practice, we all do body movement exercises, and some body singing (body songs and body scales), loosening and stretching, including attention to how we move our hands and arms for piano playing, so that when we do sit at the piano, we're all warmed up.

Our positive approach and physical exercises relax, realign, and focus the spirit and the body. We are calm in our minds, so our attention can be clear to focus for learning, and for practice. (If we feel intimidated, we can't relax well to learn). We build confidence (instead of self-doubt or fear) through careful, conscious ability development, step by step.

Sometimes parents are surprised by all the **commotion** kids can create when they are happy in the lesson environment. If teacher is happy and reassuring, parents can settle into a student role, letting teacher handle all the energy. **It's exhilarating**. You learn how to **direct and manage kids'** and parents' enthusiasm.

More of my colleagues are working this way, discovering the rewards.

Parents and teacher have heart to heart talks about lesson life. The teacher is the director during lessons, and the parents can relax and become students, letting the teacher manage the kids. Parents can leave "discipline" to the teacher. Parents and teacher can be in email contact to keep up with each other's thoughts and wishes.

Once I had a parent who'd (unbeknownst to me) just started a "discipline class" for her 3 and 5-year-old boys. Suddenly I lost control of the lessons because she would scoop up her boy at the instant he "didn't respond" to my instruction and take him OUT of the room, causing him to cry and everyone else to lose their cool. My way is to ask politely, and wait. Then I try perhaps another way, demonstrating, singing, trying to catch the child's attention truly, and WIN compliance (never force it). But this mother was following a different plan, and it destroyed my lesson. The child cried hysterically, was carried out, and lost. I didn't know until later what the story was.

When parents and students enter my studio, they can leave any struggles and discipline issues outside; they can help me by **LETTING me win the kids' attention**. Parents and teacher can develop private (away from the kids) talking relationships. Here's where "private" is useful. So we know the issues. Sometimes we don't even know our own issues until things happen. We deal with them as we go along, doing our best. Later, parents and teacher can analyze and discuss. When we keep in communication with each other over private channels like email and phone, we can keep helping each other.

Sometimes a student will be alone for lesson because of vacations, special events, whatever. It can be a nice, quiet, relaxing change. It's good to have a variety of formats possible.

Still, if families have had the experience of togetherness in their whole lessons, having **parents and kids watch other kids' whole lessons**, there's a special bonding and helping of each other's studies that stays with them forever. It's like a one-room schoolhouse where the little ones look up to the big ones, and the big ones learn in being models for the little ones. If students have to come alone to lessons sometimes, the warm glow from their "**Suzuki family individual lesson group**" still motivates. They ask about each other, even leave each other messages and gifts.

**Dr. Suzuki said, "One child, one parent, one teacher, bad environment."** (See the article with this title in American Suzuki Journal Vol.34#, 1Fall 2005, pg. 50-51). Dr. Suzuki said that we need to teach families together in **weekly individual lesson groups**. This develops a rich fabric for ability development (rather than having a student's lessons hanging from a thread, a single thread). **Students learn, and are motivated to keep studying**, by listening to and observing great artists, teachers, **and their peers!**