

Sources of Motivation
or
How Sevan turned her mom into a Suzuki Violin Mom

By Armena Marderosian

Sevan had been asking for a violin from age three, maybe even two. She would make herself a toy violin out of two chopsticks, holding one on her shoulder and bowing on it vigorously with the other, singing. But she wanted a real violin. Her frustration led to crisis just after she turned four when she walked into that little room (the Shar exhibit at EMU) full of tiny violins on tables and in the hands of other little kids. Sevan repeated her wish for a violin, and upon being told once more that we don't just *buy* a violin because *first* we contemplate the responsibilities of lessons and home practice, Sevan threw herself on the floor and kicked, cried and yelled, causing great embarrassment to her mother. Of course it was her mother's fault for always singing and playing music for her and taking her to Suzuki workshops and concerts where Sevan saw all those kids with little violins.

Later that day, Sevan went with her mom to the Pease Auditorium big final violin concert and was in the audience with her friend Jenny. Sevan's mom suddenly realized Sevan was missing, and frantically searched for her. When she asked people if they'd seen Sevan, they pointed to the stage. There was Sevan smiling in the front row of the whole performing group, happily playing her heart out, her bow going in the right direction for Twinkle A!

Sevan had taken matters into her own hands! Sevan's mom was stunned, with no idea how this had happened. She never learned the story until Sevan secretly wrote about it for her college application essay almost 14 years later. It turned out that Jenny, whose Suzuki violin teacher mom had made a pretend violin for Jenny, had gotten a nosebleed when it was her turn to go on stage as a pre-Twinkler. In her college essay, Sevan confessed that at that moment she saw her chance, snatched Jenny's "violin" (Jenny was still three) and ran up on stage to fulfil her dream.

When Jenny's mom saw Sevan playing on stage, she said, "Oh she's ready. I'm starting a group tomorrow, and she can be in it!" It was out of my hands. I became a Suzuki violin mom. This had not been my plan. (I had wanted only piano, which she was already doing.) Sevan made it happen; Sevan was going to be a violinist! (A year later, Sevan's baby sister was born and the obsession spread as Anoush began grabbing Sevan's violin away and started lessons herself at age two).

Sevan knew for a long time that she wanted to have a violin and play violin. It was totally her idea. She didn't actually get a violin that fateful day at Eastern Michigan University. At her first lesson group, her teacher, E. Cathy Keresztesi, made her a margarine box violin. Sevan practiced holding it and "bowing" on it with a stick. When Cathy decided that Sevan was ready for a real violin, Sevan was so happy!

Knowing that studying violin was all her own idea must have helped keep her going through years of practice, so that as a pre-med major at college, she still takes violin lessons, plays in orchestra, and sings in choir. She plays piano (her first instrument), also guitar, clarinet, recorder, and for fun, trombone. On trombone, Sevan plays a mean "jingle bells" even if she can't stop herself from laughing before she gets through it!

If children are in a musical environment which uncritically encourages them to join in, they naturally want to sing and play instruments just like they naturally want to walk and talk. Adults who want music-making for children's lives need to let children be in positive-approach environments which nurture both the desire for music and the confidence to participate.

How is this done? From their earliest age, best prenatally, we sing and play music for the babies, repeating great works for them to learn deeply (“memorize”), and we repeatedly let them see others, including other children, singing and playing music. We let them absorb the sounds and sights, the beauty, expression, joy, and life of music, of rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and spirit in music. They’ll naturally be drawn to it if we keep putting them in enriching, encouraging musical environments, just as they are drawn to talk and walk by the communication and activity around them. When they make efforts, we show happiness, not criticism. When babies start to talk and walk, we communicate our delight to them. We don’t say, “You moved your mouth wrong”, or complain when they fall down. We just try to help them by our positive example and response, showing them the way, always encouraging. If some disability becomes evident, we devise ways to help them without discouraging them. This “mother tongue learning”, Shin’ichi Suzuki’s idea, is what we emulate for teaching piano, violin, all instruments, and everything else, maintaining the positive approach forever!

All healthy babies learn to talk and walk. None say they are uninterested or unable. No one tells children that they don’t have a talent for talking or walking so they shouldn’t open their mouths or get up. Yet sometimes this still happens to children with music. Many former children were told not to sing because someone believed that they had no talent. The children of *these* thwarted people often have parents who don’t sing to them because of this error, thinking that they will damage their children by singing badly. What a mistake! We all should sing for babies so babes will learn that people sing, and express themselves musically as humans.

Practicing an instrument can be difficult even when the motivation is strong, so adults need to constantly feed the desire for and understanding of lessons and practice by letting children watch others’ lessons and practice. When children’s motivation droops, sometimes it’s because they need more lesson buddy time, or they need much more listening to their study pieces, they need better practice strategies, or there is negative energy discouraging them. We have to keep it happy and keep them happy. We tell them what to do rather than what not to do. We keep showing the right way for them to emulate as a positive model. We say “yes”, or “let’s try that again” (and avoid the spirit-depressing “no”). We acknowledge their efforts and intentions as well as their achievements. Our enthusiasm inspires theirs and their enthusiasm inspires ours.

We have to take the time to figure out, each step of the way, how to “skillfully inspire” children, as Dr. Suzuki said, not just force them, so motivation is coming from within the children. No one wants to feel forced. Children need to know that this on-going endeavor, which keeps getting harder, was their idea, not something imposed. And they need to know how to proceed in a way that is clear enough to entice them to really work at developing their abilities. When children are resisting, maybe we’re asking too much. We should back off temporarily, ask for something they do well easily, thank them, and let them be done. Psychology always counts. Students and parents need to feel respected and appreciated.

Scheduling lessons together helps kids and parents learn and be motivated. Dr. Suzuki said we should let lessons be in a lesson group with other children. All are fed by the synergy of music friends whom they look forward to seeing. They learn from watching each other, they encourage each other, and they feel it’s natural to play with others watching. They learn to help each other. This increases motivation, communication, understanding, happiness and ability! It diminishes stage fright in concerts and in all of life.

Kids who are used to playing music in front of others tend to be confident in other situations like speaking in front of the school class to give a report. And, because our Suzuki kids memorize their pieces from the beginning, they develop an ability to memorize in general, which gives more ease of learning. This helps a lot with memorizing math-physics-chemistry formulas and foreign language vocabulary. Our Suzuki style learning gives many benefits.

Sevan and Anoush have loved going every June to Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp for Suzuki Family Camp (western Michigan) where they have a big Suzuki family of friends. Blue Lake increases

their learning and motivates them to practice, thus develops their ability and gives them more confidence.

Sevan shows this kind of confidence in her life, walking into new territory with excitement and drive. This confidence feeds the courage I saw when she went out for the high school gymnastics team and was competing even when she was really a beginner, same with college diving, and the time we'd moved to Palo Alto, California and she didn't know one kid, but insisted on walking alone into Jordan Middle School that first morning. I'd wanted to go with her. Her insisting on going on Outward Bound in the hardest Rockies course, and going far away to college (Colorado College) also shows her spirit! I thank Dr. Suzuki's ideas, and I admire my daughter. I know that her life certainly isn't going to be boring!