

Dealing effectively with parents

Edward Maxwell

Parental support is arguably the most crucial factor in a student's progress. But managing a parent's role in the process can be a very delicate operation. Do they interfere too much? Or not get involved enough? Do they make unreasonable demands on the teacher? Are they obsessed with exam results to the exclusion of meaningful learning? To what extent are they justified in dictating how we teach because they've paid the fees?

Parents are often wonderfully supportive and appreciative, and, of course, they've made a brilliant decision for their child: to have music lessons. In this resource I'll look at practical ways to build and maintain positive relationships with parents.

Introductions

Establish a clear line of communication

When you take on a new student, it's essential to get off on the right foot: introduce yourself to parents or carers, either through a phone call or email. It's best to avoid using a personal email account: use a school email, or have a dedicated work email address. When teaching private students, you normally see parents face to face, but when teaching through a school or music service, there's often little or no direct contact, so it's good to make the effort.

Present a professional persona

From the outset, it's crucial for parents to respect you as a highly skilled and qualified professional. Tell them about your training and qualifications, mention the tens of thousands of hours' practice you've put in, and tell them what performing work you do. Some parents think that because they passed Grade 8 20 years ago, they're just as qualified as you: disabuse them of that notion as quickly as possible.

Discuss your and the parents' expectations

Setting out your philosophy of teaching and being open about your expectations at the start can avoid unnecessary conflict later on. Your expectations might be very much at odds with those of the parents. For example, a parent might think they're paying for exam certificates, while you might think you're introducing a student to a lifelong love of music and nurturing an ability to be able to play with others, and to improvise, compose and explore sounds. Neither view is wrong per se (though I can guess which side of the fence most music teachers would come down on), but this potential disparity needs to be addressed.

You need to be confident that you have a coherent plan and know what's best for a student. When you pay a professional – whether a plumber, car mechanic, vet, lawyer or accountant – you're buying their professional expertise, though of course you do have some input. It's completely legitimate to ask what their plan is and how they hope to achieve it, but you don't tell them how to do their job. A teacher with a plan should have the confidence to justify their approach (of course there's a little give and take along the way). You're the expert and you need to take charge.

Parents' responsibilities

In addition to paying your fees, buying music and maybe hiring an instrument, parents are primarily in charge of policing a regular practice routine. Be clear about your expectations. Even a child who wants to learn frequently resists practice (I certainly did when I was a child).

Ensure that the parent has provided the necessary equipment at home, such as a music stand, and a quiet place where a student can practise undisturbed. Positivity and encouragement are essential, so comments about 'sounding like a tortured cat', even if spoken in jest, can be highly discouraging.

If a student tells you that their parents don't allow them to practise at home (because they don't like the noise, or it disturbs the baby, or the neighbours complain), you'll need to address this with them. When pushed, they can almost always find a short amount of time when practising doesn't disturb anyone.

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Practising seven days a week could mean that a student improves seven times as fast, and parents potentially increase their value for money seven-fold.

Contracts

In addition to a mutually (and probably verbally) agreed approach to lessons, it's essential to have a formal written agreement in place. Among other things, this will cover missed lessons, the notice period required and when fees are due. Most schools have terms and conditions for lessons, but if they don't, write your own. The Incorporated Society of Musicians has a teachers' pack available to members, and the Musicians' Union provides a contract template.

Communication

Be friendly but keep a professional distance. I like to get on first-name terms with parents as quickly as possible, but I don't reciprocate when a parent signs off an email with a kiss. Once you've got a bit too friendly, parents can take advantage, for example in expecting you to make up missed lessons. And be on your guard – many years ago, a student's mother misinterpreted my friendliness and wrote me a very long letter expressing her feelings towards me. Awkward.

It's always a positive thing if a parent takes an interest in their child's music lessons, though this sometimes needs to be managed carefully. Some parents are very demanding of your time and want a detailed post-mortem after every lesson. If this is the case, don't feel obliged to give an instant reply: remember that you've only been paid for the actual time teaching, so any extra time devoted to answering queries is down to your own goodwill. Although it's courteous to respond, don't feel obliged go into too much detail. Personally, I get more frustrated by parents who don't engage in any communication – they may think that paying the fees absolves them from any further responsibility.

For most parents, a note in a student's practice notebook is sufficient. The practice notebook is also a very useful record of the lesson. If a parent accuses you of not teaching a student a chromatic scale, you can point out that you wrote it out in their notebook 18 months previously and have written 'learn your chromatic scale' every week since. (Though you may want to reflect on why they haven't learnt it in all that time, and consider other strategies to teach it – merely writing 'learn it' every week is obviously not working.)

Keeping parents informed can pre-empt many potential problems, and it's important to send a quick email (better than a phone call, because you've got proof you've sent it) to parents if:

- ▶ you need to change a lesson time.
- ▶ you won't be available the following week (obviously, name-drop if you've got a performance with a major orchestra, or a film session – no harm in stressing your skills and experience).
- ▶ a student doesn't turn up to a lesson, is late, or forgets their instrument and/or music.
- ▶ a student has worked particularly hard – it's always good to be in touch with positive things too.

A website is a great way of presenting useful information. My timetables are always posted on my website, so nobody can ever say they didn't know when their lesson was. If I change a lesson time, I send an email and post an amended timetable online. Due to safeguarding issues, it's essential to use only first names of students when posting timetables online. An occasional newsletter can be useful to send YouTube clips featuring famous musicians, give advice about instrument maintenance, circulate information about concerts and music courses, and quote research about the benefits of music education.

Be sure to cover your back: keep proof that students and parents have been informed of lesson times, keep a register and make sure there's a record of material covered in lessons – this protects you should there be any queries or disputes.

Feedback

Listen to feedback with an open mind. A common response to positive comments is to gratefully accept, but the perception can be that negative feedback generally comes from people who don't know what they're talking about.

But what if the parent who praises us is the one who's deluded, and the one who criticises us has legitimate cause for complaint? We should be constantly re-evaluating our own teaching, and always be able to justify our approach. Parents are usually on our side – we all want what's best for a student – but sometimes they might unintentionally sound confrontational.

We can all express ourselves clumsily when outside our areas of expertise, so work with them to find common ground. A grievance often comes from a misunderstanding, so rather than digging in and getting defensive, try to see things from their point of view – sometimes there are no rights and wrongs, just different perspectives.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing

It's great when parents support and encourage students at home. However, they're sometimes overbearing, and unwittingly undermine your efforts. I once had a piano student whose reading was very weak, but who had a good ear. I set a high turnover of easy tunes to improve her reading and was baffled by the fact that, while she played everything fluently the following lesson, her reading didn't improve. It transpired that her well-meaning mother was teaching her everything by rote at home, so I had to write notes in her practice diary saying 'Play this without any help from your mum.'

Some years ago, an angry parent chastised me for failing to tell her son that 'quavers are joined up'. What did she mean? Sure, they are sometimes beamed together, but not always. Did she think they should be slurred? Well, not unless it's marked, but if so, the fact that they're quavers is irrelevant. I had to explain about ratios and that the rhythm of, say, two quavers followed by a crotchet is identical to that of two crotchets followed by a minim.

One of the keys to educating students is educating their parents.

Exams

When children take gymnastics, swimming or ballet classes, they usually receive a certificate and go up a level every few terms, but crucially, it's achieved with little or no practice in between lessons. It's perfectly understandable, therefore, if parents who have no experience of music exams hold the same expectations for their child's music lessons. We must explain the difference. A parent asking why a complete beginner hasn't yet started their Grade 1 pieces may not be being pushy. They could be merely applying their experience of swimming lessons to music.

Learning a musical instrument requires a lot of rigorous and disciplined practice, and there are no shortcuts. In his excellent book *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*, Matthew Syed challenges the common belief that sporting and musical talent is a natural gift. This is my very rough estimate of the amount of practice required to work your way through the ABRSM grades, which I give to parents:

- ▶ 50-150 hours of practice, then Grade 1
- ▶ a further 100-175 hours, then Grade 2
- ▶ 150-200 hrs, then Grade 3
- ▶ 175-225 hrs, then Grade 4
- ▶ 200-250 hrs, then Grade 5
- ▶ 250-300 hrs, then Grade 6
- ▶ 300-350 hrs, then Grade 7
- ▶ 400-500 hrs, then Grade 8 (achieved in a total of 1,560-2,150 hours)

Working to those estimates, if a student practises for ten minutes, three times a week, it could take around six years for them to achieve Grade 1.

All professional musicians will have done well over 10,000 hours of practice – this is useful to reinforce your expertise to parents who think that because they've got Grade 8, they're on the same level as you.

A good teacher should also be providing a broader curriculum than just exam pieces. I'm always dismayed when I see that a student has learnt only three exam pieces – often under pressure from parents. Students should be learning non-exam pieces, too. Why not learn all the other pieces in the Grade book? It will build up a better knowledge of repertoire and style, and develop sightreading skills.

Over the years, I've found that the less time a student spends on exam repertoire, the better marks they get, because they're improving faster as a musician. And rather than just focusing on the three required pieces, I like them to learn several options from each list. All this needs explaining to parents.

Pushy parents

That's a slightly provocative subtitle: try not to judge or pigeonhole parents – keep an open mind and remember that they're only doing what they perceive as being best for their child. Wouldn't we all do that?

Here's a (sadly) common scenario. You've agreed to take on a student who has passed Grade 5, and you're looking forward to getting stuck into some interesting, varied and relatively advanced repertoire. In your first lesson, you quickly realise that the student can barely read a note and has been taught all previous pieces by rote – maybe every fingering has been written in. They have very little technique, are unable to clap simple rhythms and struggle to even name the notes on the staff. You ask to see the music books they've previously used and they can only provide exam books, maybe even just photocopies of exam pieces. After explaining that you really need to go back to basics, the parents say, 'Yes, of course... but when are we going to start on Grade 6?'

The previous teacher may have caved in to the parental demand for exam certificates, to the exclusion of building thorough foundations, and you may have a student who can play three pieces without any musical understanding. They have built a house without any foundations, and you're left to pick up the pieces. If the parents are not willing to accept that you need to undertake a substantial period of consolidation, you may have to walk away.

What do you do if a parent of a Grade 3-standard student wants to learn a Grade 5 piece for a scholarship audition at a new school? You can explain that although this may be possible, there may be other elements to an audition – for example, they're likely to struggle if they are given sightreading or scales. I use the following analogy: imagine you're selling your house and in order to make a good impression, you splash a coat of paint over everything, but without the necessary preparation. In the short term, it might look great, but in the long term you're creating extra work: the new paint will need to be removed, all the surfaces prepared correctly and then more paint applied. The point being that any time spent preparing a piece that's too hard is essentially time wasted, and that damage may be done in the process. The parents must fully understand this before you agree to this.

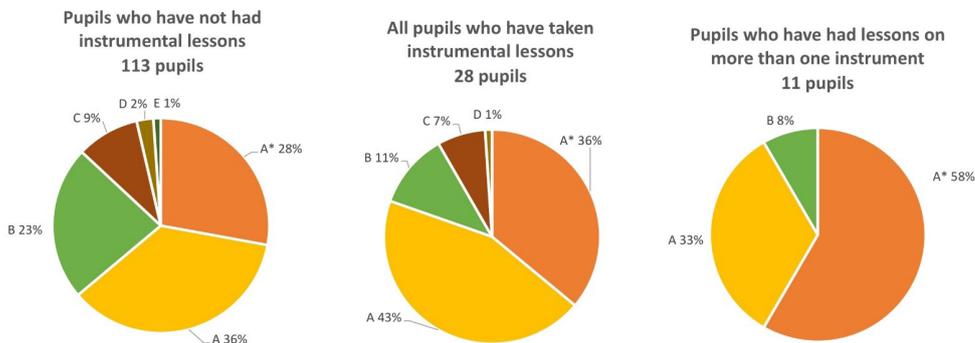
Most parents we perceive as 'pushy' are kind and well-meaning, if counterproductive. Very occasionally 'pushy' can shade into pressuring or even emotional abuse. If you suspect anything serious of this nature, as with any safeguarding issues involving children you teach, you must report it.

Timetabling in schools

Missing class lessons can be a very thorny issue for parents and, indeed, class teachers. We need to articulate the wider benefits of music education clearly. Research has shown that music is proven to be a learning accelerator, and students who learn a musical instrument perform better than their peers academically, even when they miss class lessons to take their instrumental lessons.

It's always useful to have research to quote that shows instrumental lessons complement, rather than compete with, class lessons. You can find lots of articles online. There's a large overlap in schools between academic high-flyers and musicians. This prompted me to analyse the A level results of musical and non-musical students at Reigate Grammar School, where I teach – see the pie chart below. I'd stop short of making any conclusions about causality – it's always dangerous to make assumptions without proper research: maybe these students are good at music because they are bright, and not vice versa. However, I think it's fairly safe to conclude that missing class lessons hasn't done these students any harm. If you have access to this data at a school where you work, it's valuable information to quote to parents (and, indeed, any class teachers who roll their eyes when you collect a student from their classes).

Comparison of A-level results between musicians and non-musicians (Reigate Grammar School Summer 2018)



Notes:

- Pupils' instrumental lessons are rotated throughout the school day in years 7-10
- Pupils in years 11-13 have lessons scheduled outside the academic timetable
- Pupils learning more than one instrument have one rotating lesson and one fixed lesson outside the academic timetable
- 'Instrumental lessons' includes singing lessons

Parents may make requests for a student to have a fixed lesson, but it's essential to be fair and consistent. To ensure a smooth rotation of lessons through the school day, all students must miss their fair share of class lessons, lunchtimes and break times. It's not fair on students whose parents respect the system to essentially be penalised because you're giving in to demanding parents. Usually schools will have clear rules about timetabling, so it's essential to stick to these rigidly. A parent may threaten to move to a teacher outside school if you don't accede to their demands for their child to, say, never miss maths. This may be an empty threat, but if, after explaining all the evidence of the benefits of music lessons, they refuse to back down, you will have to let them go. Bending rules can set unwanted precedents not only for you, but also for your colleagues.

Missed lessons

Hopefully your contract or terms and conditions leave no grey areas: missed lessons, through sickness or forgetfulness, are still chargeable. A parent wouldn't expect a class teacher to come in on a different day if a child is off sick, and if you signed up for a course of ten swimming lessons, you wouldn't expect the teacher to make up a missed lesson. Why should a parent expect you to behave any differently?

There are certain circumstances where schools ask you to be flexible around school activities or trips, but these should be explicitly mentioned in your agreement, and you should still insist on being given sufficient notice.

There's an excellent article about why parents should pay for missed lessons here (<http://thepianoteacher.com.au/articles/business/make-up-lessons-from-an-economists-point-of-view/?fbclid=IwAR1sqwaaUZFGoaL3mleQZ7-OYRyNdOdMbf-PJRdcvPjSLXZhxzr8qCcr11k>).

You have a responsibility not only to yourself to uphold professional standards, but also to your colleagues. If you allow parents to break the rules, you undermine your colleagues who insist on sticking to them.

Although parents have to pay for a missed lesson, you have the right to postpone a lesson if, for example, a gig comes in at the last minute. This principle applies to professionals in all fields – remember that a dentist may cancel an appointment, but if you don't turn up, you still have to pay. Most instrumental teachers are paid for around 30 weeks a year, leaving 22 weeks unpaid. Professional work does not fit neatly into these weeks off, and we need to take the work when it's offered in order to sustain our careers. Parents are normally very understanding if you communicate this clearly, and are generally delighted that their child is being taught by a working musician.

Disputes

If teaching in a school, the head of music, or even the head teacher, may be able to mediate in any disputes. Don't let things fester or sweep issues under the carpet. If you suspect a relationship with a parent is breaking down, copy your head of music into email correspondence and keep them apprised of the situation. Don't keep things quiet until they explode in your face.

Having the school copied into correspondence may well help to moderate a parent's language – if they know they're talking only to you, they may be downright abusive. And if they make any threats – 'I'm going to report you to the Head' – pre-empt them by telling the head teacher straight away. Any unfounded allegations can have extremely serious consequences, so be as transparent as possible. The chances are that the parent will have displayed similar behaviour towards other teachers and the school will be aware and supportive.

Unpaid bills

Your contract should stipulate that bills should be paid in advance. If fees are not forthcoming, send reminders and then threaten to cease teaching. I've heard colleagues say that they sometimes continue teaching a child even when a previous term's invoice has not been settled. I generally threaten to stop lessons when the bill is a month overdue. If you teach through a school, they will normally be very helpful in helping to chase up unpaid bills. Professional organisations, such as the MU or ISM, also give assistance.

If a relationship breaks down irreparably

When a relationship with parents cannot be fixed, be prepared to walk away. This may be desperately sad for the student, but ultimately you cannot overrule a parent and plough on with a course that the parent is resisting.

One advantage an instrumental teacher has over a class teacher is that you can normally walk away. It's not a sign of weakness or failure, but this situation can nevertheless be extremely stressful – I've had sleepless nights worrying about a conflict with a parent. Ultimately, we can't control how parents behave, and we need to look after our own well-being.

Summary

- ▶ Establish and maintain a good relationship with efficient lines of communication.
- ▶ Make sure parents are on board with your teaching philosophy and methods.
- ▶ Have professional self-respect and keep a professional distance.
- ▶ Communicate long- and short-term goals and have mutually agreed expectations.
- ▶ Make sure parents understand the correlation between practice and progress.
- ▶ Don't be bullied into entering students for exams until they are completely ready.
- ▶ Evangelise about the benefits of music education.
- ▶ Remember that the better informed the parent, the more success we're likely to have with the student.
- ▶ Look from a parent's point of view – that way, it's easier to correct misconceptions and misunderstandings.
- ▶ Cover your back: keep a record of what's been covered in lessons and keep all correspondence.
- ▶ Stick to a professional code of conduct and contracts: be consistent and stand firm.
- ▶ Report any safeguarding suspicions to the relevant authorities.
- ▶ Be prepared to walk away.