

Music To Their Years

Exposing your children to musical instruments may grant them a gift for a lifetime

How many times have you seen a piano and wished you could sit down and play it? Or heard a masterful violinist and asked, “Why didn’t my parents ever introduce me to musical instruments?” Chances are, it’s happened often and now you want to give your kids what you missed out on. Ahead, we’ll look at the benefits of music beyond the talent itself and how to encourage it in your children in a healthy way.

Teach Your Children Well

Sam Zyman, composer of classical music and teacher of music theory at Juilliard, says the discipline music teaches children can last a lifetime. He should know, having taught gifted children such as Jay Greenberg, who had a piece commissioned by the New Haven Symphony at the ripe old age of 12. “It provides a structure to a child’s life, because you have a goal and from lesson to lesson, and especially over years, you see the progress,” Zyman says. “You could also make a comparison with someone who doesn’t practice enough—they’ll see their playing slowly get worse. It shows kids early that there’s no getting around hard work.”

Zyman also says it teaches collaboration, something they’ll use for the rest of their lives whenever they are part of a team at work. “It gets away from being a competition and becomes about musicians working together,” he says. “When you’re in a quartet, you learn not to try and outdo the other but to make each other better. It instills a sense of community.” Zyman even knows of studies which cite musical study as increasing the IQ of a child. “I’m not sure how much it does,” he says, “but if it teaches you discipline it will carry over into anything you want to do.”

Making A Musical Introduction

Pianist Joyce Yang, who won the silver medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition at 19, says it’s critical for parents to introduce their children to instruments at a young age but to do it in a positive way. “Bring kids to children’s concerts because it’s usually young musicians who play there so they can see that they can do it, too. I remember when I was 13 playing for kids who were three-five years old—I had so many kids come up to me afterwards and parents telling me I helped their child figure out what instrument they wanted to play.”

Dr. Lindsey Bergman, a child psychologist and assistant professor in UCLA’s Department of Psychiatry, says getting the child to start an instrument is the easy part, the hard part is getting them to keep it up. “Children have a natural curiosity to try new things, no different than taking them to a dance class or trying a new sport,” Bergman says. “The learning curve is such that they learn a lot quickly so they are excited about it. But that learning curve can drop off and so will their motivation. You need to recognize this and find active ways to help them still enjoy what they’re doing. Maybe you can

speak to their music teacher and see if they can concentrate on the songs your child particularly likes to play. Also, talk with your child about why they like to play and then you can remind them of those things during the tough times.” Zyman also believes in keeping focus on the positive, convincing the child that music is a special gift and not just an extracurricular activity which could help them get into college: “Bring Brahms and Mozart and sit down with them and tell them, ‘let’s listen to this together.’ Tell them about Mozart’s life so they see there was a person behind this. Listen to classical music with them during dinner—show them you love it and they may learn to love it also. It’s like eliciting a child’s interest in books: you do it by reading to them, not by just telling them ‘go read’ like a chore.” But Bergman says there’s no way music can avoid being seen as a chore if you load up too many activities to go along with it. It will also likely affect the quality of their playing, because if they’re spreading themselves too thin, everything they attempt will suffer.

From the musical commitment she had growing up, you may think Yang was suffering herself. From the time she was 12, she spent Saturdays waking up at 5:30am and not getting home until 9 at night from Juilliard Pre-College. But her mother understood she still needed to be a kid, recalls Yang, so Sunday was left for her. “I wouldn’t have been able to be successful as a musician if I wasn’t also getting time with my friends on the weekends,” Yang says. Thankful for that space, Yang still says her family was the inspiration for where she is today, living on her own in Manhattan and traveling all over the country, because of the early exposure they gave her to music. In other words, she doesn’t feel robbed of a childhood, but that she was given an incredible way to earn a livelihood. “I remember a girl who was brought to tears by my playing,” Yang says. “She didn’t know what inspired or moved her but something about what she heard made her feel something so deeply. How many jobs give you an opportunity to do that?”

Clearly you don’t want to push your children too hard, but if you still want to be a hands-on parent, Bergman says why not get your hands on the instrument, too? “One parent I know took lessons together with their child and was able to share in the successes of getting a piece right,” she says. “They’d even skip practice once in a while and it let them share getting away with something.” In fact, says Bergman, there was only one real downside. “The parent was worried when she started advancing faster than the child!”