



Is my child ready for lessons?

By Miriam Klein, Director
Heartland Music Together

Take your time!

You may be feeling that your child is ready for a more "solid" musical diet than the music fun in Music Together classes, but please consider that much learning happens even after basic musical competence appears. The time your child spends just playing with music helps to consolidate these newly developed skills so they will last for a lifetime. If they are participating joyfully in class, the odds are good that children are still deriving benefit from this kind of curriculum. The next step, of instrumental lessons, involves practice, practice, practice. Are you ready to take this step? Consider also the additional music mastery possibilities of our [Big Kids classes](#)!

At what age can a child start lessons?

I'm a former Suzuki cello teacher, and a parent of a Suzuki cellist who started at 4. It's possible to start as young as 3 on a musical instrument, but this is rare. A successful start at any age depends on the child, the teacher, and the nature of the family support. The readiness signs I would look for in deciding whether to start a child on an instrument are:

1. Does she have basic musical competence, or is she close to achieving it? Can she sing with accurate pitches, and keep a steady beat? Can she start a song from different starting notes (i.e., sing it higher or lower) and still have it come out successfully? Can she "hear" the music in her mind and imagine how it should sound? It's much easier to learn to play an instrument if these basic music skills are already present, although with a very patient teacher she can learn both at the same time.
2. Can he maintain focus on an activity for at least 5-10 minutes? Can he sit or stand quietly for at least that long? Does he have basic finger dexterity?
3. Do you have a teacher who is experienced working with young children, who can make lessons feel like a game, and who is comfortable offering very brief lessons initially?
4. Are you ready to help your child with practicing at home? Young children especially need lots of patience, encouragement, and creativity to help them enjoy practicing. It helps if you can see ways to make each practice step into a game, and if you're comfortable about both of you taking teeny tiny steps in progressing with the instrument. It often takes a year or more for young children to master the first song in the Suzuki literature!

Which instrument for your child?

If a child shows a strong preference for a particular instrument, I think it's a good idea to honor that preference if at all practical. If it's not practical, or if your child doesn't show a strong preference, you
(more)

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can make the choice, honoring your child's temperament as well as your own preferences. You can learn more about instruments by attending live concerts, especially programs intended for children, or by watching videotaped performances of different instruments. Most ideal would be to meet someone who plays the instrument your child is curious about, and let them encounter it directly.

Some instruments are better suited for young children than others. Stringed instruments can be scaled down to fit the size of the child while still being able to play the same range of notes as a full-size instrument. Woodwinds and brasses cannot be scaled down without sacrificing the essential sound of the instrument, and frequently require a certain level of maturity in the player's mouth and dentition. (Flute is one exception.) For this reason, children rarely start on wind instruments until mid-elementary school. Along with strings, piano is an easy entry instrument for young children, as it requires little physical strength to produce a sound. As children's hands mature, they will be able to play more of the piano literature.

Remember, children can always switch instruments as their preferences and abilities mature. The practice time they've invested in the original instrument will help them more easily master whatever instrument they choose next and the musical foundations they've built will transfer easily to any musical activity.

Why I like the Suzuki Method

The Suzuki approach is very compatible with the philosophy and approach of Music Together classes. Children learn to play their instrument as an extension of their own singing; but now the singing comes through their fingers and through the instrument. They learn the songs by listening to the repertoire on recorded cds, and especially in beginner classes, play a number of musical games to help them develop their skills. Family support and participation is a key element, and children are free to progress at their own pace.

While reading music is an essential part of the Suzuki curriculum, this skill is not introduced until the child is already comfortable with the instrument and has a stable foundation of technique in place. This approach is ideal to help children develop listening skills, and also works best for young children who might otherwise be overwhelmed by the simultaneous challenges of learning to read music while also mastering the fundamentals of their instrument.

Where to find a teacher

The Louisville Suzuki String Association is a good resource for locating Suzuki teachers. They can be reached at LSSA@bellsouth.net or 502-852-0537, or on the web at www.neighborhoodlink.com/org/suzuki/

Regardless of which teaching approach you choose for your child, make sure you find a teacher who seems to love teaching, and with whom you and your child feel a rapport. The best teachers for beginners are not necessarily the most expert musicians, but the ones who are able to share with their students their passion and joy in what they do.

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