



*Learn how to nurture your child's natural musical abilities in this series of articles for families & teachers.*

## Article 6

### **Why Our Children Don't Want To Continue Playing Their Instruments**

**By Susan Bialek**

Playing an instrument is a mature pursuit. It requires care of that instrument, discipline to persist and practice over what can seem to be excruciatingly long periods of time without discernable progress, while also attending to the minutia of learning to read music and apply that knowledge to the operation of the instrument. I believe 4th grade band teachers deserve lifetime achievement awards for keeping their students' excitement alive while at the same time facing the daunting task of making sure students build a strong foundation on which to become independent music readers and players. To say this is a complex mission is a gross understatement.

I recall a conversation recently with an outstanding trombonist who teaches elementary level brass students. With few "buttons" or valves with which to execute each note, and in the case of the trombone, only a sliding brass tube to guide a player from one pitch to the next, a brass player must have excellent aural tuning skills from within to reach the goal of playing accurately and in tune. This brass teacher told me that if every beginning fourth grade brass player had early childhood music class or group singing experience to build these aural skills, her students would progress faster, play better in tune, find the endeavor more satisfying and may have a better chance of sticking with it longer. As orchestral string instruments are without frets as found in a guitar, similar challenges face young string players.

I know a veteran expert violin teacher who teaches both classical violin and Appalachian fiddle playing. Her students of course learn to read music. But they also all sing. They learn to sing their fiddle tunes first. They study their scales and modes and violin technique and learn to aurally recognize those patterns in the fiddle tunes. And then, when all of these pieces converge, her students play challenging and long mountain fiddle tunes by ear and from memory with tremendous tuning accuracy, melodic freedom and happy exuberance. They bring that zeal to their classical playing as well.

Although there are effective methods that teach instruments by ear first, often achieving a high level of playing proficiency first and transferring to reading music later, it is also commonplace in some cultures to require a certain level of musical exposure, experience with singing, knowledge of solfege, and a basic understanding of musical notation and rhythm *before* moving a child to an individual instrument.

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Knowing your child's levels of persistence and patience and learning style can inform the best choice of method, yield satisfying progress on the instrument and put the child on a path to eventually expressing music through an instrument instead of the instrument serving as a thing that one has to operate to produce sound. Some schools offer one or the other, so be sure you understand the philosophy of your school's music curriculum. Meet with the music teacher if you are unsure how to proceed or if you feel your child is in danger of wanting to quit.

Here are some reasons children tend to quit their instruments and what you can do to help prevent it:

- ◆ **Solitude of lessons:** Even if there is an occasional recital, it can be lonely with no chance to work toward a common goal with peers of playing music together. A musical ensemble that doubles as a social group is effective! Play together and for others often! This also helps reduce fear of performing.
- ◆ **Practice expectation is unclear:** A third grader once told me that the point of practicing was to make something easier. Indeed! But if the actual steps to doing that are unclear the child cannot progress. There is a careful balance of some early parent involvement and the child's learning to practice independently. Meet together with your child and the teacher to go over what is expected for home practice. A great deal of the learning and progress will happen during practice sessions, when it is more likely that something will truly click for the first time than only at the lesson. Although tedium comes with practicing, effective, logical practice yields clear progress which builds excitement and enjoyment.
- ◆ **Frustration:** The excitement and interest can wane quickly when progress is too slow and/or the frustration is too high. For some children, too much time having to be spent deciphering the code of musical notation while at the same time dealing with the physical demands of learning to manipulate the instrument is just too frustrating. Be sure the instrument is in proper working order. Encourage the child to look at the notes first, imagine what they will sound like, hold the instrument and practice the finger/hand placements first. Sing it. Then, try to play. The preparation should indeed make something just that bit easier. Some children are more successful waiting a year before being ready to manage all of these challenges.
- ◆ **The instrument chosen was not the right match**
  - Aural skill:** A good ear is necessary to play any instrument, but as a beginner, instruments *without* frets or specific keys/buttons/valves for each note are exceptionally challenging in this regard. If aural skill is high and physical strengths appropriate, then string and brass instruments can work out very well even for a beginner.
  - Physically too demanding:** Consider your child's strengths when choosing an instrument – fine motor coordination (independence of hands and fingers), large motor coordination (use of entire arms or limbs), upper body strength, size/height, and embouchure (ability to form the correct mouth shape for some brass or woodwind instruments to get a clear sound).
  - Your child is not in love with the sound of that instrument:** Hearing the chosen instrument played well should make eyes widen, or induce a smile or some other sign of glee. Make sure your child attends an instrument demonstration at school or sponsored by a local orchestra or music store. Sometimes called "instrument petting zoos", these forums give children a chance to hear, touch and sometimes even try instruments. In addition to hearing the instruments, sometimes a teacher or visiting instrumentalist can discover that mouth shape or size of fingers, hands and arms will set a child up for more success with one instrument over another. Even if it's a second choice, it may be worth listening to this advice.

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# Awakening the Natural Musician in Your Child

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A student recently asked me to name my favorite piece of music; A difficult question to answer. It is an ever evolving list rather than one singular musical selection. However most of the orchestral pieces of music on that list are there largely because of my intimate familiarity with them having played the clarinet parts for them. I could read the music and learned the physical technique to play the pieces in tune. Only then, with great excitement, could I play them as part of an 80 piece orchestra. It made every squeak, cracked reed and every out of tune note worth the 6-8 year journey. Playing *Night on Bald Mountain* or the authentic theme from *Star Wars* with all of those peers or to play in the pit orchestra for a musical theatre production was thrilling! Just imagine the joy felt during that once in a life time opportunity of marching down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in NYC, in a crisp marching band uniform, golden plumes on our heads shining in the sun, while we played John Philip Sousa marches all together from memory.

I feel the same way about choir of course, but for the child for whom an instrument is exciting, playing in an ensemble can serve the same purpose and provide the same haven for that child. For children who do both, singing and playing an instrument reinforce and support one another immeasurably. In adulthood, even if music isn't pursued professionally, the investment of time and persistence yields a lifetime connection to making music and to doing so with other people, in addition to the well documented benefits to the brain and to learning in other disciplines. Community choirs, bands and orchestras are full of engineers, chefs, podiatrists, teachers, furniture restorers and college math professors. I cannot think of an adult who regrets continuing music lessons, regardless of current profession. I most often hear, "I really regret that my parents let me quit."



Susan Bialek, Artistic Director of Children's Chorus of Maryland, has over 22 years of experience as a choral music teacher, BA in Music from Vassar College, MA in Teaching, Music Education from Manhattanville College, and Kodály certification from the Hartt School of Music.

## Further Reading

[www.musicparentsguide.com](http://www.musicparentsguide.com), **Why Students Really Quit Their Musical Instrument (and How Parents Can Prevent It)**, Feb. 17, 2015 written by Tony Mazzocchi & other articles

Your Musical Child, **Inspiring Kids to Play and Sing for Keeps**, Jessica Baron Turner, M.A.

Sound Choices, **Guiding your Child's Musical Experiences**, Wilma MAchover and Marianne Uszler

## Parent Resources

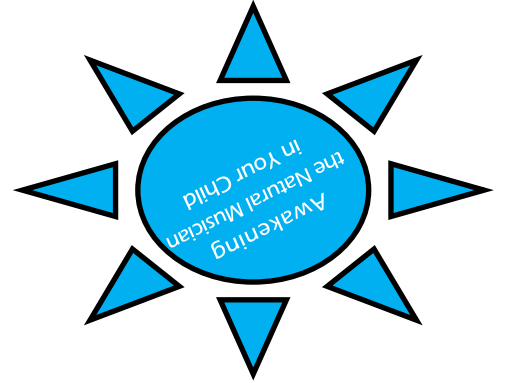
We hope these family-friendly resources provide ideas that encourage your child's musical abilities. All the articles in this series are written by the Children's Chorus of Maryland's music faculty and supported through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about music programs at Children's Chorus of Maryland, call us at 410-494-1480 or email [ccm@ccmsings.org](mailto:ccm@ccmsings.org).



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*Under the direction of Artistic Director Susan Bialek, our music Conservatory program features highly qualified teachers, small classes, and in-depth vocal enrichment to provide children with a complete musical education and choral experience. Children as young as 5 ½ are encouraged to audition for one of the Conservatory's three choirs. Classes and rehearsals are offered twice weekly from September to May at CCM's facility near Towson, and performances are held each semester. We welcome families whose children attend public, private and parochial schools as well as those who are homeschooled. Scholarships are available. In addition to our Conservatory, CCM offers a summer camp, and music and play classes for 4 to 6 year olds. For more information, visit [www.ccmsings.org](http://www.ccmsings.org), call 410-494-1480 or email [ccm@ccmsings.org](mailto:ccm@ccmsings.org)*

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