

Making Music a Permanent Part of Life for Your Kids or Grandkids

By: Gregory R. Zinser

Gregzinsler@gmail.com

www.Music123.org

Although I did not pursue music as a career, it has always been a big part of my life. I took a few piano lessons when I was eight years old, was in a band all through high school and played in piano bars during most of my college years. I continued playing in bars and at private events when I started my career in accounting after graduation, and still play and sing on a regular basis. However, the most important thing I did with my love of music is pass it on to my kids. The two boys are now 37 and 34 years old and when I see the appreciation and talent for music they have today and think back on how it all happened, I'm convinced there is a direct connection between what I did when they were growing up (some on purpose and some by accident) and where they are now. I'm equally convinced that any parent or grandparent can give the gift of music to their kids or grandkids to some degree regardless of their own musical ability, background or financial means. If you are able to devote some time and attention to this when the kids are very young, you can give a profoundly life-enhancing gift that [studies have shown to have a direct link to academic success, attitude, confidence and overall quality of life.](#)

My career in health care administration did not involve music. I'm a business person, and when business people talk about something other than business, it typically involves either hobbies or kids. In my case, either one invariably leads to a discussion about my musical interests. During the past 50 years, I've met very few business people fortunate enough to also be musicians. Of the rest, almost all wish they had taken up music in some form when they were young. Stories of their parents forcing them to take piano lessons or play some instrument in the high school band usually end with their regret they did not stick with it. If they have young kids or grandkids, they would love nothing more than for the kids to have music in their lives, but often assume it would be impossible for them to pass something on they never had themselves. I believe it is possible and will suggest ways to create an environment that can inspire an interest in and love of music.

This gift comes in two forms:

- Awareness and appreciation—a recognition and love of different types of music; and
- Participation—playing an instrument, singing, performing, etc.

Creating an awareness and appreciation for music

An appreciation of music has great value regardless of whether or not it turns into participation, and there is excellent music to be found in every genre. The first step is to put together collections of what you consider to be the “best of” each type of music. After searching your own collections; you can use online resources such as iTunes, Spotify or other similar download sites. When my kids were young, there were no such resources online. I bought countless individual CD's (and yes, even vinyl records) in search of the best music I could find, and then recorded those songs onto a cassette tape. Today, this job is as easy as selecting songs from a website and then downloading them to your phone or burning a custom CD on your computer. The selection of good music can't be left to the radio (even satellite radio) or TV's music channels. These sources play a wide variety of music within each genre--and that is the problem. In any musical genre you explore, you'll probably find music you really like and other music not as much. And this is the beauty and convenience of the technological age we currently live in--we get to CHOOSE the music we'd like to experience. The key is variety. If you can find the best of many types of music and then expose the kids to it in small doses and at appropriate times, they just might grow to love all of it.

It's extremely important to do this during a period I call the time of "Maximum Parental Influence." While there's no standard for this, I consider it to be the time from birth to about eight years old when kids:

- ✓ Don't have other activities outside the home to compete
 - with time devoted to music;
- ✓ Don't yet have peer pressure to influence the music they
 - listen to or instruments they choose to play; and
- ✓ Look up to their parents and grandparents and want to do things with them.

There's no such thing as too young. Start providing this exposure as early as possible and play the best of all types of music in the car and in your home. We never believed in a quiet home. In our home, music or television was always on and it was always 80/20 in favor of the music. When the TV was on, it was often music specials or concerts by great bands or solo artists. Even some of the network TV shows like Sesame Street and the Bugs Bunny cartoons had good music; and my kids remember all of it to this day.

Exposure and encouragement

Once you've assembled a collection of the best of all types of music, initiate music-related activities having an element of fun for the kids. Some examples include:

1. Headphones--Small kids love putting on headphones. Make sure the volume is right, then watch their eyes light up as they hear the sounds that seem to be coming from the center of their head!
2. Percussion--Play Latin or other music with a great beat, and have the kids play along with simple percussion instruments. Tambourines, maracas, claves, shakers and small drums are all great choices. This is a two-for-one, as they're gaining an appreciation for the music and learning to keep a beat at the same time.
3. Start musical traditions--Devote a specific time each week to a particular type of music you love. In our family, we would always play classical music during Sunday morning breakfast.
4. Add music to other family activities—Have theme dinner theme nights (Mexican, Italian, French, Hawaiian, etc.) and play the appropriate theme music while preparing and eating dinner together. You can add another fun dimension to this by wearing some of the garb consistent with the theme—even just a hat is a nice touch the kids will enjoy when they are young and remember long after they're out of the house.
5. Use of travel time-- Car time is one of the few times you have your kid's undivided attention. Besides being a premium opportunity to talk about important things, it's also a perfect time to introduce different types of music and promote the many positive aspects of singing.
6. The universal instrument--The voice is an instrument all kids love to "play", and singing with recorded music can help them develop the ability to match tones and keep time with their voice. Music for singing along should be simple, fun and easy to learn. Many of our favorites when the kids were 3-5 years old were done by Raffi, a well-known artist specializing in songs for children. Singing with or to your kids when they are young is another two-for-one in terms of both music appreciation and participation.
7. The power of performing--Another way to encourage kids to love music at a young age is to have them perform—for you, your relatives, or anyone else coming into the house who

will listen. Learning a song as a “present” for mom or dad also has many benefits, besides the lifetime memories for you as a parent. The quality or length of these performances is totally unimportant. When kids are young and impressionable, a short vocal rendition or a few strums on the guitar will have the same effect as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Whether they’re singing a song or playing a percussion instrument to recorded music, this is absolute magic. The positive feedback and approval children get by performing will encourage them to do more like nothing else can. As is the case with listening and singing, it’s never too early to start performing.

8. Recording--With equipment of any kind (audio or video), you can record kids’ performances and give copies to friends and relatives. They are likely to tell the kids how much they enjoyed seeing or hearing the performance. In addition to encouraging young kids to learn more things to record, the performing aspect and related reinforcement also begins to build confidence.
9. Experience it live--We also took the kids to live concerts. It’s never too early, but when they are very small, get seats as close to the front as you can where they’re able to see. Hearing won’t be a problem but, for obvious reasons, you need to be sure you’re not too close to the speakers and always bring earplugs just in case. Music festivals are particularly good venues with a variety of activities for the kids. In any form, the magic of live concerts is for kids to watch the performers having a terrific time and see the crowd’s reaction. There is no substitute for the impact on a young child of seeing an inspiring live performance.

Other ideas that worked

When my two boys were in high school, they listened to the popular music of the day, but also listened to classical music, rock and roll from the 50’s through the 70’s, old standards, Latin jazz and more. Today at 37 and 34 years of age, they love many types of music and have their own collections. They appreciate the beauty of a great classical piano performance as much as a high-energy rock concert. They recognize the power of music to express or change the entire range of human emotions. All of this began with the exposure efforts described above and, in their cases, the appreciation also developed into an interest in becoming musicians themselves.

Recap of suggestions relating to music appreciation

- ✓ Create a “best of” collection for several types of music and provide
 - exposure at home, in the car;
- ✓ Introduce percussion instruments and headphones;
- ✓ Create musical traditions and integrate with other family activities
- ✓ Singing—at home and in the car;
- ✓ Perform for others (singing or playing percussion instruments);
- ✓ Record performances for family and friends;
- ✓ Attend live concerts and music festivals.

Creating and sustaining an interest in making music—the early years

With the possible exception of leaving a very large trust fund, there may be no single thing you can do for your kids that will provide more lifetime enjoyment than creating an interest in playing a musical instrument.

Most parental responsibilities during early childhood development are “directive.” Parents typically do not rely on “creating an interest” in going to bed on time or finishing dinner before leaving the table. Music training is different. It never works to force lessons or the selection of a particular instrument over another. To be sustainable, music lessons must not be viewed as a chore or an obligation. In this case, the parental task is to motivate and inspire, and it starts by creating an environment within the home where musical interests are likely to grow. In the preceding section, I emphasized the importance of creating an appreciation for music at an early age. Creating an interest in playing an instrument must also be done early before school and friends become a priority, and before peer influence becomes stronger than parental influence. Once that happens, it’s difficult to generate any interest in spending the time and effort it takes to learn a musical instrument.

Instrument Exposure

Creating a musical environment begins with having all types of instruments around the house and encouraging the kids to play them. As mentioned above, playing percussion instruments with your kids along with recorded music will not only make the early exposure to music fun, but will also teach rhythm--an important part of the learning process for playing other instruments. Rather than just allowing them to make noise, show them how to play in time to the music. When you hear them trying to do it themselves without you (which is exactly what you want) help them improve to the best of your ability.

While percussion instruments are fun, inexpensive and easy to store, there are many other instruments to consider. The ukulele is an especially good choice as it is the right size for the kids and easy for them (and you) to play. Guitars, horns, string instruments or even a piano are other instruments that can be purchased used for a very limited investment. Even if no one ever plays them, they can always be sold later to recoup some portion of the investment. The potential benefit of the exposure to these instruments coupled with the very limited risk of financial loss, make used instruments the right investment in any home with young kids. However, of the many great choices available, the instrument kids are most likely to be drawn to is a piano. If properly placed, it’s hard to ignore and almost impossible to resist. There are probably three things many of you are thinking at this point:--too expensive; no room for it; and no one knows how to play it. Allow me to make the case for getting one anyway. An old spinet style piano can be found for hundreds of dollars, not thousands, and a space as small as four-by-six feet is sufficient. If no one in your family plays, that might be the best reason of all to get one. The cycle of passing music down from generation to generation has to begin somewhere, so it might as well be with you. As long as the piano can be placed in a high traffic, high visibility area, the kids will likely be drawn to it whether they can play or not.

When the kids were very young, I would sit at the piano with them on my lap and hold one finger of their right hand to play a melody they would recognize. When they were a little older (two to four), I would point to the keys for them to press themselves. It was also at this age they would enjoy pounding on the piano without my hand on theirs. Allowing some of this is OK, but most of the exposure should be to show how the piano can sound when recognizable melodies are played. If you’re fortunate enough to be able to play the piano yourself, play songs they recognize and enjoy, and let them hear what it sounds like to play them with more than one note. If not, take them to hear others play or watch YouTube videos with someone playing a song that they recognize. Any type of exposure to playing the piano at an early age can lead to an interest in taking lessons.

In addition to the piano, we also had an old acoustic guitar around the house from the time the kids were born. I could play only a few chords, but it doesn’t really matter if anyone knows how to play it. The important thing is the exposure to this type of instrument. Much like the piano experience, I would strum a few chords while they were in their high chair or playpen (my first

captive audience). I let them strum the strings to get an idea of the sound. It was easy to see they were enjoying it immensely. You can also enhance the experience even further by occasionally singing simple songs.

Fortunately, you needn't have all of the instruments around the house to provide exposure—music stores sell a wide range of instruments. A few times each year, I would take the boys on “field trips” to the largest music store in our area where there was a great variety of tempting musical “toys”. These trips were extremely fun and productive, as we could wander around and play all the instruments, and at the same time, hear other accomplished musicians demonstrating what the instruments could sound like when played by someone who had taken lessons. These trips always gave the boys ideas and inspiration. As an example, it was in the music store where Jason, my oldest, first realized there were many types of guitars used to produce very different sounds. This exposure most definitely contributed to his interest in a wide variety of music from classic rock to country to contemporary.

It was also on one of these trips we happened to see what I consider to be one of the best instrument investments I ever made, in terms of both how much they enjoyed it and the level they were able to achieve. With young kids, the percussion department will always be a big hit, and my kids were no exception. When the boys were about eleven and fourteen, we encountered a set of electronic drums. Someone was playing them with the headphones on. We couldn't hear anything, but noticed the person wearing the headphones was enjoying himself immensely. We hovered in the department until we were able to commandeer the drum set and headphones. After about five minutes of playing around with this new toy, it was pretty obvious my boys were hooked. While the very thought of drums and the noise typically associated with them causes a negative reaction for most parents, I strongly encourage exposure to this much-maligned instrument by describing how it is different from what you might assume. Electronic drums are set up just like a traditional drum set, but they don't require nearly as much room. The drumheads are made of either hard rubber or synthetic material and when they are struck, it triggers an electronically generated sound either through the headphones or an external amplifier. The sounds produced are extremely realistic, especially through the headphones. You can also attach a CD player (or iPhone) so the kids can play along to any of their favorite songs. When we first got this set, none of us had ever played drums. We began by trying to keep a simple beat (as you would with any other percussion instrument) to some of our favorite music. Through the internet, we learned how to hold the sticks and some of the other basics. This opened up a whole new world of music for the kids and they soon became obsessed with learning to play better. They would compete for practice time and would often get up early to play before they had to leave for school—always with the headphones on and without bothering mom and dad. You never know what the kids will become interested in playing or what level they might achieve if they are exposed at an early age and properly inspired.

Whether singing, playing the piano, guitar or any other instrument, young and impressionable kids will naturally want to do what they see and hear their parents or grandparents doing. If you play some type of instrument yourself, it's particularly inspiring for kids to see their parents performing. While I had the pleasure of playing and singing for my kids when they were younger, almost everyone has sung to their kids at one time or another. If you don't play an instrument, don't let it stop you from letting the kids see you try. Pick out a few notes on the piano or pluck a few strings on the ukulele or guitar, or play some type of percussion instrument. You might also consider taking lessons with your kids, which will be very inspiring for them and a great bonding experience for you. All of these things have a positive impact that is hard to measure.

So never miss an opportunity to sing and play the instruments you have around the house, either with them or for them. Sing the best you can and pretend to play the instruments even if you don't know how. Chances are the kids won't know the difference. Your one-note rhapsody or slightly off key vocal rendition will most likely get the same look of admiration and joy you would get if you were a professional.

One final comment about the exposure to instruments involves the old adage of "out of sight, out of mind". The instruments should be in plain sight around the house at all times. We had a piano, an acoustic guitar, a bass guitar, an electronic drum set and all of the percussion instruments in a place where the kids walked by them every day on their way to the kitchen. When they had free time, this visual contact resulted in actual contact that would not have taken place if the instruments were put away out of sight.

Turning a music lover into a music player

So now, if all has gone well, you have children or grandchildren who love all types of music and you will occasionally catch them playing with one or more of the instruments to which they have been exposed. If all is going extremely well, they may become excited about the possibility of playing some of the music they love in the same way they have heard others play it (either at home, on TV or at concerts). Sometime during the period of "Maximum Parental Influence" (usually at about age six), they may embrace the idea of taking lessons. This often happens when they hear a song they love and really want to learn how to play it. This is your window of opportunity, but there are several important things to consider that will improve the chances of long term success when starting lessons.

While interest in any instrument is worth pursuing, starting with piano lessons should be encouraged, but not forced. Lessons learned in the first few years of piano instruction can form the foundation for learning all other instruments. In addition, piano is an instrument kids are most likely to stick with their entire lives. When they are older, a piano will likely be available in their college dorms, other public places and at friends' homes. This means both opportunities to practice and to perform. This is why most people wish they could play the piano—there is always one around somewhere to remind you of how much fun it would be to play for yourself and others.

I still remember the day I decided I wanted to play the piano. I was about seven and my sister was seventeen. Her boyfriends came to the house on a regular basis and like many younger brothers, I would hide and spy on them and was generally annoying. However, one boyfriend stands out from the rest. His name was Kenny and he was the pianist for a gospel quartet. When he came to the house, he would play for my sister and I would see first, how much fun he had playing, and second, my sister's reaction, along with anyone else who happened to come in. Right then, sitting on the floor of the closet, I decided I wanted to learn to play. After Kenny would leave, my parents saw me at the piano trying to play some of the things he'd been playing and they knew it was time to take advantage of my interest. Within a few months I was taking piano lessons and it was the beginning of my life-long devotion to music.

Whether the interest you help to create is in piano or some other instrument, the next critical step is to find the right teacher who can establish a relationship with your child that is the right combination of nurturing and motivating. Some teachers are much better with kids than others and it will require some time and research to find the right one for you and your child. The temptation, however, is to find the one closest to your home and assume it will work. This is exactly what we did with our oldest, and for him, it happened to work out well given his specific areas of interest and ability, but for our youngest, it soon became apparent he needed a different type of teacher. In any case, I encourage you to make physical proximity a distant

second or third in the order of priorities. More important considerations include experience working with kids, the type of music they'll teach (after teaching the basics); how they keep the lessons interesting and fun, and their willingness to teach kids songs they want to learn. Talking with other parents whose kids have been with this teacher for more than one year is essential. Most teachers have periodic recitals. Go to a few of the recitals and see what type of music is being played after one year, two years and beyond. If things look promising, have a trial lesson or two and observe the relationship between your child and the teacher. If your child respects the teacher, appears comfortable, and most importantly, considers the teacher a friend who he/she doesn't want to disappoint, you have all of the essential elements of a sustainable interest in learning.

Once you've found the right teacher and lessons begin, it is important your son or daughter feels they are a part of the process. Talk to them often about what they're enjoying or not enjoying about lessons. Attend the lessons occasionally to be sure the environment is supportive and enjoyable. Attend all of the recitals with family and friends. Check to see there's always an appropriate balance between the more academic process of learning the technical aspects of music and the enjoyment of applying that knowledge to learn songs they enjoy playing. Ideally, the teacher will assign a variety of music from classical to contemporary, but after no more than six months, assignments should include songs the kids are excited about learning. As I mentioned earlier, never miss an opportunity to have the young music student perform for you or other family or friends. A private recital makes a wonderful Father's Day or Mother's Day gift. If this happens, make a big deal of it; make up a program; have them dress up in suit or dress; and record the performance if possible.

Music lessons also provide an opportunity to teach early lessons in time management. Suggest a certain amount of time be allocated each day to practice and work with your child to coordinate this with other activities. Empowerment and involvement in the process are important aspects of creating a desire to practice. Listen in on practice sessions whenever you can, but resist any temptation to be critical. Recognize and be supportive of any and all progress. If you have concerns about the rate of progress or practice habits, discuss them with the teacher in private. When it's really going well, you'll find the kids putting in extra practice time instead of watching TV, playing video games or other activities kids engage in for lack of anything better to do. This is how you'll know they no longer consider practice to be an obligation; it's the best indication they're likely to stay with it, which they will do as long as it continues to be fun and they are getting the right type of reinforcement along the way (both of which will require your attention and vigilance).

This seems like a good place to interject something for mom and dad to consider doing for themselves. As I mentioned earlier, I meet so many people who wish they could play the piano, but think it's too late for them to learn. I would first suggest when learning to play an instrument as an adult, the primary objective should be enjoyment, not virtuoso status. However, if you have the time and desire to learn to play classical music and you still have the dexterity required to do it, it is never too late to start. On the other hand, if you don't have the time, patience or dexterity to play at that level, anyone can achieve a level that will add enjoyment and another great dimension to life. People learn to play piano in many different ways, and if you find the right teacher, you can customize your experience based on what style of playing most interests you. The guitar is also well suited to that purpose--and learning a few chords on the guitar is even easier and faster than learning the same thing on piano. Instructional books are readily available online and there are endless numbers of instructional YouTube videos available. Consider making guitar or piano lessons a family activity to provide added inspiration and motivation to your kids or grandkids.

Recap of suggestions for creating an interest in playing an instrument

- ✓ Exposure to instruments:
 - consider a used piano
 - keep other instruments around the house in plain sight;
 - take music store field trips
- ✓ Lessons—piano first; find the right teacher
- ✓ Reinforcement—performing, recording, songs as gifts

Closing Comments

I can't imagine my own life without music and feel so fortunate I was able to pass it on to my kids. My passion for helping others do the same comes not only from what it has meant to our family, but also a belief that this can be accomplished by any parent able to devote the time, regardless of their own musical abilities or financial resources. While there is no guarantee these ideas will take hold in your family, this is one of the greatest opportunities you will ever have to give a truly life-changing gift to your kids. If you were fortunate enough to be brought up in a home environment that included music, you know how much it can enhance quality of life for the kids and everyone around them. If you haven't had music in your own family, I hope these suggestions will inspire you to make the effort to begin a new tradition in your family that will be passed down from generation to generation.