

# Helping Suzuki Students Take Ownership of Their Musical Journey

By Cecilia Calvelo-Hopkins

When children are young, we do not ask ourselves how to help them take ownership of the learning processes they are involved in. Young humans are always engaged in meaningful learning situations: dropping objects, making cooing sounds, rolling over, crawling, starting to walk, etc. Besides, babies and toddlers are busy workers who do not need much feedback from adults to make of the simplest moments the most significant learning experiences. As years pass and children grow, however, this healthy learning process changes into a more sophisticated endeavor as they start understanding their role and the roles of others in society and ultimately develop

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their own identity. Unfortunately, in modern day society, we are seeing more children who lose the curiosity of the early stages and show signs of apathy and lack of interest at times of learning. Some of the reasons why this may be happening, which may impede a child from “taking ownership,” are:

- There is simply too much to take ownership of: soccer, swimming, music lessons, art classes, chess clubs, math competitions, ballet, foreign languages, etc.
- There is too much stress and too little time to free play or enjoy the simple things other generations of children enjoyed.
- Too little time to simply process it all.
- Parents make a big financial, physical, and emotional effort to have their children in so many extracurricular activities and therefore want “results.” This caring about outcome makes it difficult for the child (and parent) to enjoy the journey.
- Music practice (or any other kind of practice) may become one more thing in the list of things a child has to do, making it like one more chore, and this is boring for both parent and child.
- Parents feel too responsible or even guilty for the time spent away from children (this was probably not something Dr. Suzuki had to deal with), and therefore, they take on too much responsibility for children’s actions, leaving children with little room to take ownership themselves.

It is interesting to ponder the meaning of the verb *to learn*.

In Spanish and Portuguese (*aprender*), Italian (*apprendere*), and French (*apprendre*) all come from the Latin *apprehendere*, which in turn comes from the verb *hendere*, meaning to grasp, hold, possess, or make yours. In English, *to learn* comes from the High

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German and Old English (*lernen, leornian*), meaning to take in, pick up, acquire, gain skill, or grasp. Hence, as much as we may want to help the child learn, neither teacher nor parent can grasp, hold, or possess the learning for the child. Accepting that it is the child’s turn to learn is something simple but profound for a parent to contemplate. Children need space, they need not be scrutinized at all times, and they need to process and understand on their own. Eventually, they need to develop autonomy, so we need to help smooth that process of independence.

Helpful questions to keep in mind when a child goes through stages of low involvement:

- Who are we doing this for; who is the subject?
- Why are we doing this?
- How are we doing it?
- Are we as parents overly proud, overly insecure, or overly embarrassed by our children’s behavior?
- Do we understand our role in the Suzuki triangle and only participate to that extent?
- Do we allow for some time before we point out things that are not correct to let the child find out on his or her own?

Children need to take charge, so:


- Let them carry their instrument, put it away and take care of it as soon as they are old enough to do so.
- Let them ask the teacher whatever questions they have, as well as make announcements and share news or other things you consider unnecessary or silly.
- Let them make mistakes in front of their teacher without any further comments or excuses.
- Let them be responsible for their own actions (if they go to lesson unprepared, it is the teacher’s role to address it).
- Be creative and present situations where you are the one helping, but you make it sound like they are helping you! Maybe you can fold laundry as the child practices,

or cook while they practice, so they see you not only as a judge but as a companion.

- Talk less; engage in fewer conversations with the teacher in front of child.
- Let them know their relationship with their teacher is special and you like it that way.
- Allow your child some freedom at practice time—let her choose what review piece is next, if she prefers to use dice or lottery, what bow exercises go first, and let her check the practice charts, etc.
- Try not to complain about practice habits, playing, or the behavior of other students in group class, or children may feel you would do the same if they were the ones not stellar at all times.
- Give them a job they can do well related to the practice time (set the timer, alarm, get whatever materials or books or practice charts they need to use during practice, etc.)
- Ask your child to self-evaluate his playing.
- Ask open questions that make your child brainstorm and think.
- Be in tune with their emotions so that you can change the strategy as soon as you start seeing early signs of lack of engagement. Don't wait for apathy to be the norm at practice time; it is better to allow for moments of reconnection and closeness before you both are feeling resentful.

Remember that:

- Normally a Suzuki family starts instrumental lessons when the child is between three and five years of age. This is the time when, in Erikson's stages of child development, the child is going through the third stage, known as "Initiative vs. Guilt." Too much initiative on the parents' side may make the child feel obliterated; too much emphasis on things not being perfect may make the child feel guilty, incapable, or not deserving of the best parental judgment. All this affects the child's self-esteem, which in turn may create negative feelings and eventually apathy.
- Your Suzuki teacher would love to hear from you! Together you can come up with a plan that helps everyone. Maybe once in a while a parent/teacher conference or a lesson without your child can be scheduled to talk about what is going on at home.
- Your role as a Suzuki parent is critical in the triangle, but you should never be busier than the child or the teacher. Furthermore, your role as a love source is endless and very powerful, more powerful than any other source of comfort and happiness to the young child, so focus on that, and let the teacher be the "disciplinarian."
- Your calm presence is sufficient to provide most of the things the Suzuki child needs at practice time.
- Choose your battles: look at the forest and not the tree!
- Try to avoid fights and confrontations, since children may relate those bad feelings to the time together with you or the instrument itself.

- Children may just be saturated and over stimulated, so it may not be that they do not want to take ownership of their music learning, but that Suzuki practice brings a closeness with the parent that provides the perfect opportunity for an emotional letdown or an opportunity to let us know they are tired, burned out, irritated, or that something is wrong. Sorting through those emotions may allow us to help them outside of practice, at the same time as we get them ready to get the practice done.
- Be willing to walk the journey holding hands with your child and the teacher. There are no answers for all, but each will find their own as they walk this unique path! 



**Cecilia Calvelo-Hopkins**, originally from Argentina, is a Suzuki violin teacher, a SECE teacher, and a Suzuki parent. She holds a Music Education degree from the University of Houston and a Masters in Renaissance Music from San Francisco State University. She is a TX Certified Music Teacher and a TX Certified Bilingual Teacher. She currently teaches in her Suzuki studio "Clave de Sol" and collaborates in many capacities with the Latin American division of the SAA and with Austin Sound Waves which is an orchestra program for underprivileged children in East Austin. Besides teaching, Cecilia loves languages and translates regularly for the SAA.

She edited the latest translation to Spanish of Shinichi Suzuki's *Nurtured by Love* that Summy-Birchard printed in 2004.

## Suzuki Voice at the SAA Conference, Minneapolis, May 2014

The Suzuki Voice activities at the conference will include a combination of presentations for potential teacher-trainees, accredited Suzuki Voice teachers, and Suzuki parents, as well as group classes in which students may participate.

### **Presentations will include:**

- *Never too Young to Find Your Voice* (The positive influences of classical training)
- The Suzuki Voice Teacher-Trainee Experience (What to expect when you attend Suzuki Voice training)
- Symposium on Vocal Care of the Young Singer
- Warm-Ups and Vocal Ideas for the Instrumentalist
- Meetings with accredited Suzuki Voice Teachers to discuss repertoire and supplementary materials in Volume One.
- Interdisciplinary use of repertoire for combined concerts and learning experiences (Voice, Violin, Cello, Harp)

### **Student experiences will include:**

- Voice Recitals
- Volumes 1-3 in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese
- Master Classes for Students of All Ages