



Ultimate Beginner's Guide to Playing and Practicing the Violin

*Plus Daily Practice Diary,
Practice Tips and Lesson
Notes Worksheets*

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This guide will help you learn how to get better results from every practice session.

Learning how to practice well is a skill, much like learning how to play the violin is a skill. However, many teachers ignore this important skill or assume that effective practicing is common sense. I recommend that you supplement the instructions I give here by watching my free demo videos found on my Red Desert Violin [YouTube](#) channel or at RedDesertViolin.com. If you want even more help learning to practice, consider taking one of my online courses, where I spend tons of time really developing the mental skills needed for good practice.

Are you ready to get started? Let's go!

Practice Smarter, not Harder!

This guide will help you make your practice time **Efficient, Effective, Focused, and Results-Driven**.

Efficient

Efficient means that you avoid repeating the same passage too many times before the problem is fixed. Unhelpful repetition is like banging your head against a wall! Instead, after each attempt, STOP. Think. What was wrong? Is it a bow or left hand problem? Do I need to slow down? Do I need to break the passage into even smaller sections? By learning how to solve problems in fewer repetitions, we are also becoming more effective.

Effective

Effective means you can see the problems and fix them. Can you set a goal for yourself and find the path to reach that goal? Practicing effectively is probably the most elusive aspect of learning to practice, because in actuality, you are learning how to be your own teacher, and that takes time. But it will come much more quickly if you are fully aware while practicing—aware of your observations, analysis, attention to detail, and problem-solving abilities. Awareness also brings us to the next big practice principle, focus.

Focused

Being focused means that you should never practice on auto-pilot, just to put in your time. If you are practicing just to fill your quota or check it off your to-do list, you are WASTING your time! Do not focus on the amount of time spent. Focus instead on what you want to accomplish in the amount of time you have that day. And of course, that brings us perfectly to the next principle of results-driven practice.

Results Driven

Results driven means that you should start every single practice session with a few small objectives. At the end of your session, you should be able to list several things you accomplished, such as a problem solved, skills improved, or something learned. It's all about your mental state going into the practice session and being in the habit of expecting a PAYOUT for the time you spent. Sure, some of your results and rewards won't be immediate, but the small tasks will be, and that's what you need to track, because it's the small tasks that eventually lead to achieving your full potential.

A Note About “Childish” Analogies

This guide is meant to serve both independent adult students and child/parent teams.

I teach with many analogies, and some of them may seem childish to you as an adult. They are not meant to just be “cute.” They actually serve several important functions:

- First, these analogies have proven very effective in helping hundreds of my private students understand otherwise very abstract concepts.
- Second, the analogies give me a “nickname,” or shortcut in lessons. For example, I can simply say, “Greasy Elbow!” instead of, “Don’t move your shoulder...bow from the elbow!”
- Finally, the analogies make the concepts easier for EVERYONE to remember! I always try to explain the analogy before I use it, but you can [click here to see the glossary of analogies](#) at RedDesertViolin.

And of course, feel free to plug in your own analogies and exercises when they make more sense to you than mine.

How Much To Practice

As a beginner, you should be prepared to commit about 30 minutes per day practicing violin. It’s important to be consistent, just like physical exercise. For example, let’s say you decide you’d like to run a marathon. Well, you wouldn’t wake up on the first morning and run five miles, and then the next morning run 10 miles. You train by consistency, with gradual increases in intensity and duration.

Furthermore, we all understand that our training approach will be much different based on our final objective. Training for a marathon will be much different than just training to lose a couple pounds. **Know your long term goal!**

So it is with violin. Use the running analogy to figure out how much time you need to spend practicing. If you want to be a professional violinist or win a scholarship, you will be spending much more time and intensity than if you want to play for your own enjoyment.

Parents should keep in mind that a child’s attention span is much shorter than an adult’s. Do not structure practice sessions to be longer than the child’s focus will last. You can increase the length gradually, but start with EASY practice sessions so the child will begin with the feeling that practicing is easy. Later in this guide you will find dozens of ideas to help parents keep practicing fun and effective.

Make the Most of Every Practice Minute

Dr. Sander Marcus, a licensed clinical psychologist at the Illinois Institute of Technology, insists that learners can benefit with as little as three minutes of practice per day! To get the benefits of a micro-practice session, be sure to:

- Set a minimum time (no more than 5 minutes) for daily practice of exercise material.
- Have a specific series of exercises to do during that time. They can vary from day to day or week to week. For example, one day’s routine for a string player could include one scale on one string, one vibrato exercise, and one bow change. Another day’s routine could include one shift, one scale, and one trill. Choose basic exercises, and always include a scale.
- Play through the routine just once each day. No repeats!
- Play the exercises extremely slowly so you can be aware of every muscle, every sound, every detail of playing. Try to anticipate every move.
- Give full concentration for the full 3 minutes. Do nothing automatically. After all, concentrating fully for just 3 minutes on these exercises is not really asking too much of yourself.
- Once the 3 minutes are up, play anything you want to play. You have paid your dues.

For the full article and more tips from Dr. Marcus, [visit his Web site](#) and click on “Music Practice Tips.”



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Four Fundamentals for Beginners

The four *qualitative* fundamental skills for a beginner are:

- Posture and form
- Tone quality
- Intonation
- Clean playing

The next section will show you how to work on each skill. Ask your teacher to please help you focus on these four fundamentals and make sure you check out the helpful demo videos and articles on my [YouTube channel](#) and at [RedDesertViolin.com](#).

How to Work on Posture and Form

By “posture and form,” I mean the way you hold the violin and the bow when you play. This skill is very easy to do right when you pay attention to a couple small details. Unfortunately it’s just as easy to do wrong, especially if you haven’t been taught the right way.

As a beginner, you should devote the first five minutes of every practice session to working on getting into perfect playing position and forming perfect bow holds. After a month, you’ll only need half that time. In two months, it will be a permanent skill and you won’t have to practice it.

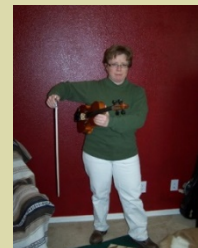
Once you learn this right, it becomes habit pretty quickly, and the pay-off is huge! The photos below are a quick guide, but [click here to view my video](#) explaining a simple way to get from rest position to playing position. (the simple steps are last 5 minutes of the 12-minute video...sorry!) And here is a video showing a [beginner’s bow hold](#), and another showing an [advanced bow hold](#). The beginner’s bow hold helps develop a nice, circular thumb and an open “[whale mouth](#)”. Children benefit the most from the beginner’s bow hold, because they are less coordinated. Adults may dive right in and learn the advanced bow hold, as long as their thumb is able to stay rounded.



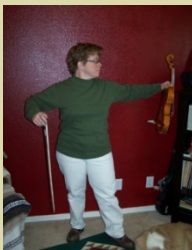
1: Face your audience with your left hand free.



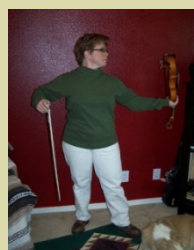
2: Reach out with your left hand and take a small left-ward step.



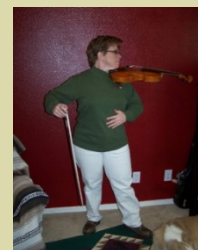
3: Grasp your violin by its shoulder.



4: Extend the arm, F-holes facing away from you.



5: Turn your elbow and the scroll down.



6: Tuck the violin under your chin.



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How to Work on Tone Quality

Tone is different from Intonation. Don't get the two confused. Tone is your quality of sound, while intonation is the accuracy of your pitch, or where you place your fingers.

A good way to remember intonation is to call it "in-TUNE-ation" because we all know what it means to sing in tune or out of tune. Remind yourself what "tone" is by referring to it as "tone quality" until you get used to the difference between the two.

For beginners, tone quality is mostly a matter of your bow hold and your bowing technique. Later, for intermediate and advanced players, the left hand also affects tone, but you don't need to worry about that just yet!

For now, there are three keys to good tone quality. 1) Learn to draw a straight bow with "greasy elbow", 2) Keep your bow on a good, consistent sounding point, also called "the highway", and 3) Choose the right combination of bow weight and bow speed. I find that learning these keys *in that order* has the best "flow" for skill acquisition.

As you explore and read more about violin tone, you will be confronted with what is called the "Three keys to violin tone". These are listed as bow weight, bow speed, and bow placement (sounding point). You can see that these keys are included in my list above, in a different order, and with straight bow and greasy elbow added.

Start with my approach for now, it is easier, and I promise you will also gain command of the basic 3 keys, bow weight, bow speed, and sounding point.

Key #1 to Good Violin Tone: Straight Bow and "Greasy Elbow"

For a quick and thorough understanding of what "straight bow" is and how to achieve it, [click here](#) and watch the first video.

To achieve good bow control and beautiful tone, you must understand the difference between straight and crooked bow. Straight means your bow is traveling parallel to the bridge, and at no time would the two lines ever intersect. Be picky! Even a slightly crooked bow will diminish your tone quality.

You must be able to see and verify whether your bow is straight or crooked. I don't recommend looking down at your bow for this. It is inaccurate and deceiving. You will think it's straight when it's really crooked. The easiest way to figure out how to pull a straight bow is to have an assistant help spot you for a while. (see video)

You can also spot crooked bow on your own using a mirror. This position is a little awkward, because you have to stand so that your F-Holes are facing the mirror, and then turn your head to the right to see in the mirror. This is not a natural playing position, but if you don't have an assistant, you'll have to do it. I never had an assistant for this, and it is harder, but it can be done! Actually...you'd have to turn your head to the right to see your assistant ANYWAY, so...duhhh....I guess it's just more fun with a friend!



At this point, you must understand the concept of the "greasy elbow" combined with straight bow." [Click here](#) and watch the second video on the page to help you understand the importance of these two skills for your tone production. (If you prefer to skip the videos: Greasy elbow means that you are moving your bow by moving your elbow joint, and NOTHING ELSE-- especially not your shoulder! Straight bow means the bow should travel parallel to the bridge.) The analogy of "greasy elbow" came from the beginners I've observed playing as if rust had built up in their right elbow...it was frozen in place, leaving only the shoulder to pull the bow. We must add some "grease" to that rusty joint, hence the term "greasy elbow". Instead of using your shoulder to move the bow, use your greasy elbow! Your shoulder may move to assist with string crossings.



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Important Note: While you are learning “greasy elbow”, it is very important to only play from mid-bow out to the tip. DO NOT play lower than the middle of the bow! You can place a sticker at the mid-point of the stick to remind you. This is important, because playing near the frog requires a whole different set of skills...be patient! All in good time!

Here is an exercise to help you grasp the concept of “greasy elbow”. (covered in the above video)

1. Do the “Scrub a Dirty Doggie” exercise (you will not need your bow or instrument for this exercise):
 - a. Stretch your left arm straight out in front of you.
 - b. Place your bow hand (right hand) on top of your left arm near the elbow, and cup your hand over your arm. Right arm is bent at a right angle.
 - c. With your right hand, brush down your arm, and up your left arm, down, up, down, up. Watch your right elbow! It is doing all the work, and this is *perfect* greasy elbow! Notice your shoulder is not moving at all. Now try brushing your arm with the Twinkle Variation A rhythm.

Last but not least, [click here](#) and watch Video #3 to see a demo on the exercises described below. This exercises will help you learn to combine greasy elbow AND straight bow on your open A string.

1. Try playing with greasy elbow on open A. Just do this with Twinkle Variation A rhythms, over and over. (Remember Twinkle Variation A rhythm? (“Mississippi Hot-Dog)

Look in a mirror:

- Make sure your shoulder isn’t moving, and greasy elbow is moving
 - Check that your bow is straight
 - Make sure you are only using the *top half* of your bow.
2. Try the entire Twinkle Variation A, focusing only elbow movement.

Once you have mastered Greasy Elbow and can spot Straight Bow and Crooked Bow, it’s time to move on to the following advanced straight bow exercises: (also covered [in video #3](#))

1. Place the bow on the A string, **near the middle of the bow**, and make it perfectly straight. Memorize this feeling. Close your eyes, and try to get back to that straight position without peeking. Open your eyes and check. Do this until you can nail it. Do this on all four strings.
2. This step is much harder: Place the bow on the A string **near the tip**, and make it perfectly straight. Memorize this feeling. Close your eyes, remove your bow from the string, and try to get back to that straight position without peeking. Open your eyes and check....do this until you can nail it. Do this on all four strings.
3. Later, you will do this exercise near the frog, but not yet. Remember, the frog is a totally different skill set.
4. You should now be aware of how very different it feels to be straight near the tip versus being straight near the middle.

Now apply these Straight Bow skills to your repertoire:

- Play through your review material—scales, Twinkles, any songs you are pretty comfortable with. Look in the mirror, or have an assistant help you to watch for crooked bow.



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- A good game to play either alone or with your assistant is to say, “Freeze”...then don’t move a muscle until you can check in a mirror or have your assistant tell you how well you did. If you’re crooked, **don’t move until you understand which way you need to move to correct it!** *We must learn from our mistakes in order to avoid repeating them! Otherwise you’re wasting precious practice time!*

Reminder: While first learning to use straight bow, try to use only the upper half of your bow, and stay away from the frog. The lower half of the bow is a whole other skill set. Be patient, and master the top half of your bow. Place a sticker in the middle of your stick and avoid going below the sticker.

Key #2 to Good Violin Tone: Practice Your Sounding Point and Stay on the “Highway”

The sounding point is the point on the strings where the bow contacts the strings. There are about 5 sounding points, (or lanes) from the point closest to the bridge to the point furthest from the bridge. The point on which you choose to place your bow, or the “lane” you drive in is referred to as “the highway.”

Beginners should play in the middle lane of the highway. In other words, play half-way between the bridge and your fingerboard—not too close to the bridge, and not too close to the fingerboard. This is where you want to be 90 percent of the time.

Be careful—gravity will pull your bow toward the fingerboard, so you will most often need to pull the bow toward the bridge, just to break even. Be aware that the index finger controls this pulling motion. (Try pulling the bow from the fingerboard to the bridge...see? Your index finger does that job.) [Check out the demonstration here.](#)

Here are some exercises to help you cruise on down the highway:

1. Practice in a mirror, or have an assistant “spot” for you. You can look at your sounding point, but you’ll go a little cross-eyed. Remember, stay in the middle lane.
2. Play all your familiar tunes and scales while watching and maintaining your sounding point.
3. Close your eyes. Play on the highway. Then play off the highway. Learn to recognize the difference in the *feel* and in the *sound*. When you hear yourself go off the highway, FREEZE, then look and see which way you went off the highway before you fix it. Learn from your mistake! That’s how you teach your brain what your tendency is and how to avoid it. **Efficient, effective practice!**

Key #3 to Good Violin Tone: Balancing Bow Weight with Bow Speed

In general, most amateurs play with “wimpy” bow, or with too little bow weight, because they are afraid of making a scratch or a crunch. Don’t be afraid of making a screech! (True story: I once heard Perlman crunch in a live, sold out performance of 2,000 people. Did he cringe or stop or apologize? No! He just kept playing with a look of pure joy on his face.)



Here I’m playing right in the sweet spot on lane 3 of the highway.

Your very best sound lies in the balance point between the weight you give your violin versus the violin's ability to push back. When you find this balance, it is like entering a vortex of vibration, sound, and beauty! Go ahead and experiment with how much bow weight your violin can take before it screeches. Use all the strength in your bow hand while still using a proper bow hand. If you ball your hand up in a fist and then use all your strength, then yes, you might break your violin or bow. But if you use a proper bow hand, you will not break your violin. Finding that sweet spot is the perfect balance of bow weight to bow speed, and learning to adjust based on the feedback your violin gives you. Always stay in balance with what your violin is able to respond to. Don't force or crush your violin's natural resonance.....you are stronger than your violin, and you will learn the electric, floating feeling when your bow speed and bow weight are in perfect balance with your violin.

Practicing Bow Weight: Bow Benders

I use an easy exercise called "bow benders" to increase the strength of the bow hand, and to learn about "pronation". Pronation is when we rotate our bow forearm, twisting pinky upwards, index downwards. My friend Todd Ehle compares this motion to holding a glass of water, and then pouring it out by tipping it to the left.

1. Simply place the bow on the A string near the tip.
2. Pronate your bow hand until you can bend the stick of the bow enough that it touches the horse hair on your bow, as shown here. ****This is quite difficult at the tip. You might have to try this several inches from the tip to start with.**
3. Do this exercise every day, and try it on all four strings. Be patient, and take care not to strain your muscles, and do not over-tighten your bow, or this exercise will be way too hard.



I am bending the bow until the horse hair touches the wood. **Important:** Make sure to use a correct bow hold. If you ball up your fist during this exercise you could damage your bow.

Remember, according to the rest of the world, the keys to tone production and tone color are 1) Bow Weight, 2) Bow Speed, and 3) Bow Placement, or sounding point. But BEFORE any of those 3 keys can do anything for you, you must master the skills of pulling a straight bow and using a greasy elbow.

How to Work On Intonation

For beginners, the best intonation work you can do is to get your tapes in the right spot, tune your violin properly, and practice getting your fingers exactly on the tapes! For better precision, use 1/8 inch graphic arts tape or automotive pin striping tape (3.17 mm), **not** 1/4 inch (6.35 mm), that is too wide and lacks precision.

Some people don't like to use tapes, but I do. Beginners have enough to worry about without wondering where the heck their fingers should go! Your ears will learn and memorize the sound of CORRECT intonation, building your confidence for when you remove your tapes. You can remove the tapes sometime in Suzuki Book 2, or whenever you feel ready. (That's always a big moment!) If you are not sure if you are ready, try removing your 2nd finger tape. If all goes well, remove your 1st tape, then 3rd tape, and finally 4th. If you start to slip, put the tape on that you most need.

It's important to realize that there is one right spot and a thousand wrong spots to play a note! A hair's breadth can truly make the difference between being in tune and being out of tune. Here are some awesome exercises to help you hit that right spot every time. And [here is a video demonstration](#), since a picture is worth a thousand words!

1. Three Pigs Finger placement:
 - a. Practice getting your first three fingers on the tapes. (Three Pigs)
 - b. Then practice getting your three fingers exactly on the tapes *without looking*. (Three Blind Pigs)
 - c. Then practice getting your three fingers exactly on the tapes *quickly* and without looking. (Three Blind Pig Races) Of course, you will peek after the fingers are all set, to see how you did. Try to remember which fingers tend to miss, so you can anticipate and correct it. (effective and efficient practicing!)
 - d. You can accelerate your advancement by including your pinky in these exercises *when you are ready* for the challenge. Thus, it becomes "Four Pigs" exercises.
2. Practice the songs you know very well while looking at the tapes. Make sure you cover up the tape completely, but not too far! If you cover the tape up too much, you'll be sharp. If you leave part of it showing, you'll be flat. BARELY cover the tape, but cover it. If you can still see part of the tape, then you are probably not in the exact right spot.
3. Then, close your eyes and use your ears instead of your eyes! (You could also have a spotter tell you which finger missed the most tapes, or how many tapes you missed in total.) It is more beneficial if you learn which finger tends to miss the tapes, and which direction you are missing them—too low or too high. This allows you to anticipate and correct the problem before it happens. (effective and efficient!)

Remember, the goal of every practice session is to increase your awareness, learn to anticipate, and ultimately to avoid making the mistakes you know you tend to make. This includes breaking bad habits, learning good habits, finding wrong notes and fixing them, and learning to pinpoint the source of the problem so that you can fix it with the least effort and greatest efficiency.

For more refined intonation work, I use the Suzuki "Tonalizations" exercises from Book 2. ([Click Here for Video demo](#)) These are exercises using only the pitches A, D, G, and E....do you see something interesting here? Those notes are all open strings. When you play an A on the violin, *wherever that A may be*, it will vibrate sympathetically with your A string—if you play it in tune. It will sound ringy, full, and will vibrate your teeth out of your head! If it's not in tune, it will sound as dead as a doornail!

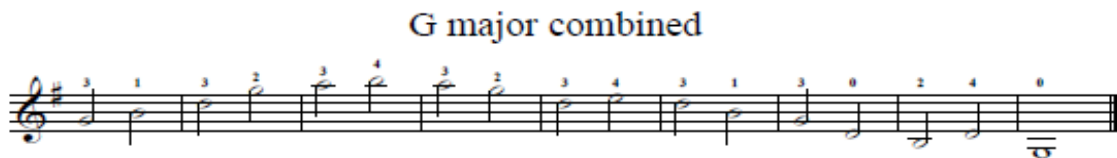
When you use these Tonalizations exercises, first practice getting your **third fingers** on the D, G, and E strings to ring and vibrate like crazy. Make sure your finger only touches one string! If you "fat finger" this exercise, you can kill your vibrations and you won't get a ringy note.



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Next, try to play the Suzuki Tonalizations from Suzuki Book 2 as shown in the video. My personal version is provided below for your convenience. Go slowly, and play each note more than one time. Go ahead and fish around and see if you can find the maximum ringiness on each note! You will eventually recognize the sound when you are exactly on the right spot.

Here is the sheet music for the Tonalizations described in the video:



How to Work On Clean Playing

Both the left hand and the bow hand have responsibilities when it comes to clean playing. I like to assign about 3 tasks to each hand, and have developed exercises to develop each task. This is all discussed in these two videos, but you can also read about it below.

[Clean Playing Part 1: Bow Hand](#)

[Clean Playing Part 2: Left Hand](#)

Bow Hand Responsibilities and Exercises to Help:

1) Keep elbow motion and shoulder motion separate. Remember greasy elbow? We must isolate that motion from the action the shoulder takes to cross to different string levels. I have nicknamed this “Elevator Shoulder”, because it takes us from the G floor to the D floor to the A floor and to the E floor.

- **“Elevator shoulder” exercise:** with your elbow bent at a right angle and the bow planted on any string at midbow, move silently from string to string. Notice the motion of your shoulder. Just observe. This exercise is silent.
- **Greasy Elbow Exercise:** Play the Twinkle Variation A rhythm (“Mississippi Hot-Dog”) on open strings. At this point, you **MUST** develop an awareness of when you are hitting extra strings. Most beginners do not notice this, so they do not correct it. It is only a matter of awareness! Just LISTEN!
- **Combine exercises 1 and 2:** Start on any string with your bow arm at a right angle at mid-bow. Play “Mississippi Hot Dog” then stop. Pause. Choose a new string, take the silent “Shoulder Elevator” to the new floor, and repeat the exercises on the new string. **NO EXTRA STRINGS!!! LISTEN!** Be alert and start HEARING it!

2) Learn to start and stop the bow cleanly. In addition to training ourselves to be aware and HEAR when we accidentally snag other strings, we must also train ourselves to start hearing other extraneous noises. The most common place noises occur is at the **START** of a note. The next most common place is at the **END** of a note, and sometimes it even happens in the middle of a note! Train yourself to HEAR these noises, and identify when and where they are happening.



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Galamian describes the detache' lance' bowing thus: "This is a rather quick stroke that is characterized by a great initial speed in the bow which then slows down toward the end of the stroke. Generally, there is a clear break between the notes, although sometimes, as in a succession of fast notes, no pause will intervene. There is neither accent nor swell at the beginning of the tone." I like to further clarify this for my students by having them focus on keeping their bow weight CONSTANT. Do not increase or decrease it.....just keep it....."in the zone" where your best tone occurs.

- **Detache' Lance' Exercise:** The perfect application of a detache' lance is Suzuki's Twinkle Variation B rhythm, as demonstrated [in this video](#). You can play the actual tune or just apply this rhythm to a simple A Major scale.

3) Hit only one string at a time by managing sounding point

I already started nagging you about listening and eliminating extra noises in 1 and 2 above. Instead of an exercise for this skill, I have a tip for you. If you have the problem of hitting extra strings when playing, try moving your sounding point a little bit closer to the bridge. Violin strings get "squishy" as you go further from the bridge, but they are very firm as you get closer to the bridge. If you are bowing in the squishy spot, your bow will easily depress the string you are playing, and will likely sink to the level of another string. This is unlikely to happen if you place your bow closer to the bridge.

Left Hand Responsibilities and Exercises to Help:

1) Learn to hit only one string at a time using *when needed*

- **Tall arches:** make your fingers stand up on tippy toe and form nice high, round arches
- **Elbow swivel:** swinging your left elbow to the right will aid your tall arches and targets
- **Slant knuckles + Targets:** draw dots on the inner corner of your fingertips (closest to thumb) and try to connect the dots to your string. Instead of dots on your fingertips, you can look at the line your knuckles form. Your pinky knuckle should be higher than your index knuckle, i.e. "slanted knuckles". This miraculously forces you into tall arches and wonderful left hand position.
- **Exercise:** Half A Major Scale with open string drone. Play A, 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1, A while simultaneously playing your open E string. This forces your left hand to stand tall. For large fingers and hands, go ahead and CROWD over toward the D string, and avoid touching the E string at all costs!

2) Develop good left hand articulation

Learn to use finger strikes (hammer-ons) on ascending passages and "pull-offs" on descending passages to aid your left hand articulation. The terms "hammer-on" and "pull offs" are borrowed from the terminology used by guitar, banjo, mandolin, and similar instruments. I do not mean to literally use the same technique they use. I am suggesting that you take that concept and apply it to your violin playing by learning to strike the fingerboard with light hammer-strokes, and to lift your fingers off the strings by pulling them *ever so slightly* to the right as you lift your finger. Please do not over-do the "pull-off" motion, it will cause other problems. But when done right, it gives excellent articulation when you need it most: on descending passages.

Think about it. What is naturally more articulated....a passage where your fingers are being dropped ONTO the fingerboard, or a passage where your fingers are lifting OFF the fingerboard? One uses the more dominant muscles used for grasping objects, the other uses our much less-developed muscles used for opening our hands and letting go of objects. THIS is where "pull-offs" can help us.

It is important for you to distinguish between using your greasy elbow to pull the bow across the strings, and using your shoulder to move the bow from one string to the next. It's a coordination challenge to keep the two separate, like patting your head and rubbing your belly, but it's a VERY important skill to keep the two motions separate.



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3) Learn when to utilize Left Hand Articulation vs. delayed finger lifting: Pieces with lots of string crossings will challenge your clean-playing skills. These crossings cause both our bow and our fingers to accidentally snag extra strings, and it gets our greasy elbow and elevator shoulder all tangled up. The best example from Suzuki Book I is “Minuet II”. That piece is the ultimate challenge for clean playing! “May Song” also has a couple quick string crossings in it, so that is also a good piece to guard against hitting extra strings.

But you can greatly help yourself in clean playing by learning when to have snappy left hand articulation versus employing a delayed left hand. Often extra noises are caused by lifting our fingers before a string crossing is complete.

How to Work on Ear Training

Pitch Comparison

We start our ear training by comparing one pitch with another, recognizing same from different, and distinguishing which is higher and lower. This is easy for some people, but others need to practice and learn what it actually means for a pitch to be higher or lower. Many people confuse louder and softer with higher and lower. The pitches start out far apart but gradually get closer and closer together until they are barely distinguishable.

Why Do Ear Training?

Having a well-trained ear will help you immensely. By training our ears, we learn to differentiate one pitch from another, how to quickly find a pitch on our instrument, and how to hear the infinitely small difference between a pitch that is in tune versus one that is just barely out of tune. Ear training is the key to playing by ear, developing good intonation, and even quick memorization. It's importance cannot be overstated!

Match That Pitch

Another aspect of ear training is to listen to a pitch played on a violin or any other instrument, and try to match it on our instrument in as few tries as possible.

DOUBLE the benefit of this exercise by matching the pitch with your VOICE. If you learn to involve your voice in this exercise, your ears will develop connections to your brain which somehow unlocks parts of our cognitive process—parts which **cannot be unlocked any other way than by singing**.

Timbre Recognition

It is harder to match a pitch from an unrelated instrument such as a keyboard or guitar than it is to match the pitch played on another violin. This is because we learn to recognize the timbre of notes on the A string, or the D string, or the E string, which immediately gives us clues and allows us to narrow down our choices. The easiest string to recognize on the violin is our E string, because it has the most metallic sound. But later it is just as easy to recognize when a pitch is played on any of the other strings.

So, when you are ready to make this exercise more difficult, have someone play pitches on any instrument you can get hold of...even if it is just an electronic pitch generator, an erhu, or a vacuum cleaner! (My vacuum drones a perfect middle C)



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Snippets

And finally, a more advanced way to develop our ear training is an exercise I have named “Snippets”.

Snippets are sequences of two or more notes played by someone else, which you then repeat. This exercise requires an assistant, but the notes can be played on any instrument. Start out with just two or three notes played in “scalar” motion, (going stepwise) either up or down, or both.

Later when you are good at hearing and repeating scalar motion, your assistant can start skipping notes here and there, in an “arpeggiated” fashion. This is much harder. Your assistant shouldn’t do large skips at first. Just skipping one note for now is good.

Interval Study

As you master the skills described above, you can begin working on interval recognition. This is where you learn to distinguish the distance between two notes, defined in musical terms as “intervals”. Start with intervals that are close together, as they are easier. Gradually, you will learn to hear notes that are very far apart and know exactly what the measurement is between them. THEN you are a force to be reckoned with! A simple Google search will reveal many free resources to help you study this important aspect of ear training. (It is also covered in all of my online classes)

How To Practice Scales

As a beginner, you should tackle only three main tasks as you practice scales.

1. Be accurate with where you place your fingers. Be extremely picky with getting your fingers *exactly* on the tapes. Your goal is to be able to hit them accurately without peaking, so make sure you are working toward that.
2. Be able to name the notes in your scale as you play them. Although I don’t have my students learn to read music until later, I *do* like them to learn very early the names of the notes on their fingerboard. Then when they learn to read music, it’s not such a black hole of abstract concepts when playing songs...they have some perspective to keep them oriented.

In learning your notes on the fingerboard, you will begin to instantly know that third finger on the A string is “D,” just like you know the color of a basketball is orange. The effort you put into learning the names of the notes in your scales will plant seeds that will pay off big time later!

3. The final task for your basic one octave scale practice is to familiarize yourself with three main finger patterns, (which fingers are close together, also called “tetrachords”). You will start to notice that scales that start with open strings tend to have a certain finger pattern, while scales that start with the first finger tend to have a different finger pattern. Pay attention to this, and commit those patterns to memory. They will serve you well in the near future.

Why Do We Practice Scales?

Scales are the building blocks of music. They are the amino acids for a solid technical foundation! If a passage isn’t comprised of scales, then it’s comprised of arpeggios, with very few exceptions! Being proficient at scales doesn’t just mean that you can play them. It also means that you understand them intellectually, as they apply to your instrument. This is referred to as “knowing your fingerboard”. It means that while playing a scale, you know what notes you are playing, what key you are in, what position you are in, what interval you just shifted, and what the finger patterns are. This takes a lot of concentration and practice! It doesn’t come overnight, and a beginner certainly isn’t expected to know all of that information yet



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Skill Stacking

Suppose you are a beginner who just made it through all the Twinkle Variations. You will probably learn an A and D Major scale first. When you practice your scales, try to apply ALL the techniques and skills you learned in the Twinkle Variations.

If you are not sure what skills you learned, just remember the four fundamentals—Posture, Tone, Intonation, Clean Playing—as well as Greasy Elbow, Highway (sounding point), Fingers on the Tapes, and apply as MANY of those skills as you can to the scale all at once.

I call this technique “skill stacking,” which means your brain has to perform more than one task or skill at a time. If you can’t keep track of all those things, start with one skill and master it. Then stack two skills and master that. Then stack three, etcetera, until you can combine all the skills successfully. For a helpful chart of skills you can stack, see the skills table in the “Bonus Materials” section of this guide.

You Need Both Halves of Your Brain!

Notice that I am asking you to do some things that would be considered quantitative, objective, or intellectual, like intonation, naming the notes, and recognizing finger patterns. Other things I am asking you to do are fuzzy, subjective, qualitative things like tone quality, posture, or clean playing. With practice, BOTH the qualitative and the quantitative skills will become automatic, but it helps to know that you must do both types of skills, because for some people, qualitative thinking comes more easily, for others, quantitative does.

You can also practice scales using the rhythms you learned in the Twinkle Variations. This is a good skill that will enable you to superimpose any rhythm over any melody, gives you excellent pattern recognition, plus it keeps you sharp on your Twinkle Variations!

As you can see, scale practice should *never* be just by rote, or just going through the motions. Your brain must be very engaged and know what is going on every step of the way. If you are playing scales on auto-pilot, just to pass the time or because you know you are supposed to practice scales, then you are *wasting your time*. Practice with PURPOSE— *every minute!*

I introduce one-octave arpeggios very soon after I introduce scales. “May Song” is a perfect time to introduce arpeggios, because May Song starts out with an arpeggio. You will practice arpeggios the same way you practice scales: play them in tune, learn the finger patterns, and learn to name the notes as you play them! Good stuff!

Can Adult Beginners Learn to Play Violin? Absolutely!

“The older student comes to me with an idea of what playing the violin should sound like and will often give up when they realize just how difficult it is. Before I accept an older student, I explain just what they are in for, and try to determine if they are really willing to “go for it”. Once that is settled, I focus on helping the student build confidence through small successes. We focus on one point at a time as much as possible. Tradition dictates that a person must be very young to learn the violin, but I find that adults can often learn quite well with the proper guidance, repertoire selection, and patience. Also, they must learn how to relax, which is difficult for all of us!”

—R. Todd Ehle, 'Professor V' (Check out his fabulous [YouTube videos](#))



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How to Review Old Material

Review every song every day. Period.

Of course, you don't have a repertoire as a brand new beginner, so you will spend your review time on preparatory exercises and reviewing preparatory exercises.

Once your repertoire takes longer than 20 or 30 minutes to review, then you will split your repertoire in half, and alternate reviewing half and half. Once your repertoire gets larger than 40 to 60 minutes, split it again.

Your songs should never sound worse than the day you pass them off for your teacher or yourself. Keep this in mind as you review. Make a list of your repertoire. As you review, you'll find that some songs are not as polished as others. These should go on a "B" list. Work on your "B list" tunes until they make the "A list" ...but continue to review your "A" list too!

If you can't nail your review pieces, it might not be just a memory slip—something might be slipping in your technique as well and you need to address it.

Why Review Repertoire?

- First, you learned new skills in each of those songs, and until those skills become a permanent part of your technique, you will need little refreshers. Reviewing your old songs is the perfect refresher.
- Second, if you don't use it, you lose it. It would be a shame to work hard all year long, and then only be able to recall the last two songs you did, especially when it's such an easy matter to routinely review your repertoire as a small part of your daily practice.
- Third, you can use review songs to apply difficult new skills. It's hard to apply new skills to new songs. It is best to be able to pull out a bunch of your old songs when you are trying to learn a new technique. I constantly use review songs while my students learn 3rd position, vibrato, spiccato, and other advanced techniques...but only in as much as each review song lends itself well to the new technique.
- Most teachers agree: it is OBVIOUS which students review their tunes and which ones do not. Students who review have a sense of "ease" in their playing, and they are just more successful. This is because they are constantly experiencing success and ease in their daily practice, and that sticks with them in the hard stuff!
- Finally, reviewing is the fun part of practice! That's when you get to enjoy the fruits of your labors! It's also nice to be able to pull out your instrument and play numerous tunes when people ask you to play.

How to Begin Learning a New Piece

I know some people don't like the concept of relying on recordings to learn pieces, but as a beginner, you have to listen to a *lot* of recordings in order to get an ideal sound in your head so that you can emulate and imitate it! Once you are intermediate or advanced, you can work on finding your own interpretation. Until then, imitate the masters!

When learning a new piece, a beginner should listen to a recording of it, REGARDLESS of whether you are learning by ear or using sheet music. You put the recording on as background music to allow it to soak into your subconscious memory, but you will also need to spend time focusing on the tune as you listen.

Focus on it as you listen, whether following in the music or not. You need to get several bits of information: How fast or slow is it? What mood is it? What style is it—dance, march, waltz, etc? What sort of bowing do you hear? Smooth, bouncy, short and choppy, etc? Listen to it enough that you find you can sing along, and you know what part is coming next. This can be accomplished in the car, on the treadmill, in grocery lines, etc.



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Once you are familiar with the new piece, try to figure out what key it is in. What finger pattern is it going to use? Can you play a scale in that key? You will need to pluck around on your instrument to figure these things out, so don't do that while driving! And, of course, you may peek at the music to figure out the key if you need to.

If you are learning the piece by ear, find your starting note. Find the highest note. Find the lowest note. These notes give you some "toe holds" or parameters for what you are about to learn. I always like to pluck my notes when I'm trying to figure out a passage by ear, because I can play along with the recording and hear myself as well as the recording. But that is just a matter of preference.

Once you figure out all the notes, try to listen for bowings. Listen for slurs, staccatos, or just plain old *detache'*. At some point, you'll need your teacher to check your work, or check your music. You can also watch a video of someone playing the song, and check out their bowings.

In the Suzuki tradition, people are religious about using the right bowings, and while some people are over-zealous about this, it really IS good training to obey printed bowings. It helps prepare you for orchestral and group playing, where playing the same bowings is important. It also teaches you certain inflection and idiomatic, typical bowings for specific circumstances, and that will serve you well in developing good violinistic instincts.

Therefore, although I don't like some of the bowings printed in the Suzuki books, I have my students adhere to the printed bowings through Book 4, with only one or two exceptions.



How to Budget Practice Time

As a very beginning student, you still have quite a few tasks and skills to practice. You will practice holding the violin and the bow properly (posture and form); you'll practice recognizing good tone from bad; you'll practice keeping your bow on the sounding point (driving in the middle lane of the Highway) and keeping your bow straight (bow control). All of these skills are the very first things you must master. If you do, you will have a very good strong foundation for more advanced skills.

Your first month of daily practice sessions should look something like this:

Practice Time: 30 minutes

Five minutes posture and form exercises

- 2-3 minutes bow hand
- 2-3 minutes violin hand

3-5 minutes ear training

20 minutes preparatory exercises (before you learn how to play anything)

- 10 minutes bow hand exercises
- 12 minutes violin hand exercise

Later in the month, you will be able to add another skill to your practice—the left/right hand combo exercises. So you should spend less time on the exercises above to save five minutes of bow hand/violin hand combined exercises.

After about a month or so, you will be playing your first song. My students' first song is from the Suzuki repertoire, the Variations on Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. The first variation is called Variation A. By the time you can play this variation, you have **dozens** of skills and tasks that you need to practice, such as:

- Perfect violin posture
- Perfect bow hold
 - Keeping the bow on the sounding point
 - Drawing a straight bow
 - Recognition of good or bad tone
 - Greasy elbow
 - Clean, coordinated string crossings
- Left hand technique:
 - Fingers can find the tapes without peeking
 - Fingers can get on the tapes quickly
 - Fingers are curved properly, lifting from base knuckles, touching the fingertips to the strings
 - Wrist is properly set
 - Left hand is relaxed and not squeezing the neck
 - Left hand knows exactly where to contact the neck

These skills will get you all the way through the entire Twinkle Variations, with a lot of refinement and a lot of small, new details thrown in.



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So, with all these new skills in mind, this is what your second month or so of violin practice should look like:

Practice time: 25-36 minutes

2-4 minutes posture and form exercises

- 1-2 minutes bow hand
- 1-2 minutes violin hand

2-3 minutes ear training

6-9 minutes preparatory exercises review

- 2-3 minutes bow hand exercises
- 2-3 minutes violin hand exercises
- 2-3 minutes combined hand preparatory exercises

15-20 minutes Twinkle Variation A

- Focus on one skill at a time, then try combining two or more skills (skill stacking). This is great for building the cognitive ability to track more than one task.

Once you finish the Twinkle Variations, about 6-8 lessons later, your daily 30-minute practice sessions should look something like this:

Practice time: 30-42 minutes

2-4 minutes posture and form exercises

- 1-2 minutes bow hand
- 1-2 minutes violin hand

2-3 minutes ear training

3-6 minutes preparatory exercises review

- 2-3 minutes bow hand exercises
- 2-3 minutes violin hand exercise
- 2-3 minutes combined hand preparatory exercises

3 minutes scales

8-10 minutes reviewing twinkles

- Focus on one skill at a time, then try combining two or more skills (skill stacking). This is great for building the cognitive ability to track more than one task.

8-10 minutes new song

4-6 minutes polished song (one you plan to perform or the last one you perfected for your teacher)



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Keeping Practicing Fun, Focused, and Effective for Independent Adult Violin Students

Pure Gold here, please read and absorb this section:

To keep your practice time effective, the first thing you need to guard against is thinking “I must spend X amount of time practicing every day, regardless.”

Don't focus on the *amount* of time spent. That is just a guideline of what is *probably* appropriate for your current playing ability and your ultimate goals.

More importantly, focus on *what you want to accomplish* in the amount of time you have that day. After every single practice session you should be able to list small tasks that you completed, something to show for your effort! If you are just practicing to kill time so you can check it off of your “to do” list, then you are most likely WASTING your time!

It's all about your mental state going into the practice session, and being in the habit of expecting a payout for the time you just spent. Sure, some of your results and rewards won't be immediately apparent, but small tasks *will be*, and that's what you need to track, because it's the small tasks that eventually add up to *your dream coming true*.

It's important for you to understand WHAT motivates you. Are you motivated by rewards, by praise, attention, pressure, deadlines, the simple satisfaction of an achievement? Once you understand this about yourself, you will understand how you can motivate yourself.

For example, I am a goal-oriented person. Setting a goal and putting it in writing is all it takes to get me fired up, so many of my ideas for my adult students are based on goals. If you are not goal-oriented, that's ok, I've included ideas for you too!

Motivation by Goals

Several tricks fall under this category, and I love them all.

1. Pick a dream-song you absolutely LOVE that is out of your reach right now, but which is attainable in a year or less. You can often find simpler versions of very cool pieces. Ask your teacher for help finding a version that is attainable for you, or visit us at www.reddesertviolin.com and post your question. We'll help you find a good arrangement of your dream song.
 - a. Then, you need to figure out all the skills you need to acquire to be able to play that piece. You may need to learn five pieces before that one to acquire the skills you need. But that dream-song is the carrot dangling in front of your nose to keep you fired up! My dream song in eighth grade was Praeludium and Allegro by Fritz Kreisler, and you can ask my teacher to this day if she has ever seen a kid so fired up as I was that year!
2. Set a performance date and write down the song or songs you will perform, and for whom. Invite those people to your performance NOW, and really commit to it. This can be a simple dinner party with friends, it could be for your kids, your partner, co-workers, church service, or your child's school class!
3. Decide what level you want to be at in one year, 365 days. If you are good at goal-setting, break it down into monthly and weekly plans for what you need to accomplish to stay on track for your yearly goal. Ask your teacher for some input on this, or visit us at www.reddesertviolin.com.
4. Pick a group you'd like to join....maybe a community orchestra or even a professional group, if you are advanced. Figure out what level you need to be on to make it into that group, break it down into weekly steps you need to take, and go for it!



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Motivation by Rewards

You know how to best reward yourself, but here are some realistic ideas:

1. Reward yourself every time you practice 30 minutes for 6 days in a row. (I like to encourage my students to take 1 day off per week.) Only you can choose the appropriate reward, but some things I have done for myself in the past are going to the movies, extra TV time, a bubble bath, or buying a book I've wanted. These rewards should be small, but meaningful, or your motivation could get very expensive!
2. Set a milestone such as a difficult piece, or completing a Suzuki book. Once you reach that milestone, reward yourself with something special—dinner out, a new item of clothing, a new violin toy you've been wanting, or better yet, concert tickets or a CD for the style of music you ultimately want to play!

Motivation by Pressure and Deadlines

Many of us are conditioned to respond to pressure and deadlines. That's okay if that's what motivates, but keep it healthy!

1. Set a performance date, and the song or songs you will perform, and for whom. Invite those people to your performance NOW, and really commit to it. This can be a simple dinner party with friends, it could be for your kids, your partner, or for church, or your child's school class!
2. Put a calendar on the fridge. Write a goal and the date it must be completed. You and your entire family will see this goal every time the fridge is opened—and believe me, kids LOVE to point out how quickly the deadline is approaching!

Motivation by Attention, Praise, Affirmation

See above under "Pressure/Deadlines." It's all about your mental state. Some people feel the pressure, others see the chance for attention and praise. There's nothing wrong with that! Bask in the glory! You've worked hard!

1. Give performances regularly in church, social groups, or for family and friends. Be careful not to wear out your welcome, though, because no matter how good you may sound, you don't want to monopolize your audience! Always leave them wanting more! On the other hand, spouses and children, it's their duty in life to listen to you as much as you want. Don't worry about wearing out your welcome on them!
2. This is one of the 5 love languages. But remember, affirmation can come from within as well as from without. Make sure you are giving YOURSELF positive support and affirmation.

Other Forms of Motivation

1. Some periods in my life have been harder than others to get the practicing in. During those times, I found that I would talk myself out of practicing if I could not devote an entire hour or half hour. FALSE! You'd be surprised what you can accomplish in just 10 minutes, especially when you know that's all you have. Do NOT fall into this line of thinking. Every minute counts, it really does. Tell yourself "Fine, you may not have a full hour, but you are NOT allowed to skip. You must do at least 10 minutes today."
2. I used to have a "practice hat" and also a "practice shirt". These were sacred items of clothing, which, once I put them on, changed me into a super-focused violin fiend. When the hat was on, there were no phone calls, no doorbells, no nothing that could interrupt the practice session. It was MY time, and everything else could wait for one hour. Think about it...what emergency can't wait for one hour? Very few...and you'll know it when it happens. Pick your magical piece of clothing.
3. Sometimes it helps if you have a safe place to leave your violin out of its case so you can dive right in without delay. Also, each time you are nearby, you can play a repetition of something you know well. But please make sure you have considered all the possible accidents....dogs, cats, birds, children, balls, etc. Don't take any risks with your instrument. It's just not worth it.



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4. Again, I encourage you to visit the article by Sander Marcus, [by clicking here](#). It talks about how to avoid falling into the trap of feeling like nothing you do is worthwhile unless you do it on a grand scale. Apply the concept of micro-practice. Don't adopt the mindset that says, "if I can't do a full 30 minutes, I'm just not going to do anything. I'll just feel like a failure." You can accomplish a TON in 3 minutes of concentrated micro-practice and more importantly, you'll feel like a success.

Keeping Practice Time Fun and Effective for Child/Parent Violin Teams

*much of my information for this section comes from Elaine Worley, of Pocatello, Idaho

Parents, you have a big, hugely important job! You are the main teacher in this whole process. It is more important that you understand a concept at a lesson than for your child to understand it. Pay close attention and take notes! For every minute your child spends in a lesson, you will spend 6 minutes!

I highly recommend that parents learn to play the Twinkle Variations. This small amount of exposure to playing the instrument is going to give you more perspective than YEARS of explaining could. Consider renting a full size instrument for 2 months when your child is first starting lessons. Trust me—your child is going to get a huge rush from the fact that you are engaging in the same activity they are. There's no better feeling in the world!

This next paragraph is pure gold, if you truly understand it and take it to heart: The best reward for your child is quality time with you! A compliment, a hug, and your approval is more motivating than any material reward you can offer. That is the beauty of being a Child/Parent team. This is an opportunity for you and your child to learn to work together as a team to solve the problems that will face you both as your child learns to play the violin. It is beautiful to watch relationships develop as mutual respect and trust begins to take root with the parent and child. This is your opportunity! Give lots of hugs and compliments! That is the most important thing to remember.

Practice-Time Traps to Avoid for Parent-Child Teams

- Don't yell, coerce, or guilt your child. Always practice in the spirit of love.
- Don't have your child practice if a friend is over or if something else more exciting is going on.
- Don't practice in a chaotic environment with TV, crowds, etc. It's hard to focus in chaos.
- Don't force practice when you know you or your child is irritable.
- Don't make practice sessions too long or difficult.
- Don't compare the child to other siblings.
- Don't call attention to the amount of money you have spent on instruments, lessons, etc.
- Avoid saying "Later", because later never comes.
- Never with-hold love.



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- Keep a positive attitude. For every criticism, give two or three compliments. A spoonful of sugar...Children will adopt your attitude toward practice time! Although it may feel like a chore to you, you **MUST** approach it with enthusiasm and excitement! This is your special time together! Remember, the main goal is to create better human beings, not to create child geniuses.
- Be enthusiastic! Show your child how much you **LOVE** the Twinkles, how every new song they learn is your new **MOST FAVORITIST SONG!** (even if it makes you want to pull your hair out!)
- Laugh and play as you work. Until your child begins to appreciate the satisfaction of her own accomplishment and a job well-done, she needs the satisfaction of having fun. Keep in mind that kids don't really "get" or appreciate delayed gratification. That is a concept you need to introduce gradually, and increase the *amount* of delay gradually. Mean- while, practicing needs to seem like fun.
- Only work on one task at a time. Eventually, you will combine tasks, but don't combine **NEW** tasks! Those require complete focus!
- It is normal for kids to not like to practice. That's okay. Make them do it anyway, just like you would make them take their medicine or eat their vegetables. Maintain your positive attitude and enthusiasm anyway. It still matters.
- Keep practice time free from chaos. Turn the TV off. Don't take phone calls. Let this be a time of calm and focus. Your child will sense that this time is a priority, and it will impact his attitude.
- Never compare your child with others. If there are problems or concerns, never discuss them in the presence of your child. Do it privately.
- Don't try to guilt your child into appreciating violin lessons. Don't emphasize your financial investment in the instrument or the lessons. This is not the point, and it totally devalues the priceless value of the intrinsic rewards your child will naturally enjoy, namely, quality time with you, approval, hugs, and praise.
- In addition to hugs, praise, positive attitudes and such, here are some collected ideas from Suzuki teachers around the world. Most of these ideas are not my own, and anytime I know where a unique idea came from, I give credit to the individual.

No Bribes, Please

Right out of the gate, I want to discourage you from offering your child bribes for practicing. (Rewards and incentives are slightly different, if presented in the right spirit.) It is a well-established fact that when humans get paid to do an activity that they once enjoyed, they lose the passion for that activity, whether they get paid more or less to do it. A study was conducted on a group of children who loved to draw pictures. (It was a famous study, and it was earth- shattering, but I can't recall where it was done at the writing of this guide.) In the study, children who loved to draw were given money to draw pictures on a regular basis. After a short time, most of the children lost interest in drawing pictures, and it became harder and harder to get them to draw. Paying them robbed them of the rewards they were originally getting from drawing, the inherent satisfaction of creating something, having someone else appreciate what they had created, and the attention that it garnered. In other words, there are subtle, intrinsic rewards you can give your child that mean more than all the candy and money in the world.

Practice Games and Gimmicks for Child/Parent Teams

*compiled ideas from Ruth Whetstone, Marie Parkinson, Rebecca Fuller, and myself

Most people will only use a handful of these ideas, because some will work wonderfully for your child and others could be disasters! You'll probably know which will work on your child.



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1. Help the child be his or her own teacher. Let the child decide how long to practice, how many times to repeat something, or what to do at the next practice session. Have the child plan his or her free time, and structure violin practice into the plan. Review the lesson plan. Allow him or her to choose what to work on first.
2. Stars and stickers on a chart will never go out of vogue! Use for repetitions, problem spots, consecutive practice sessions, etc.
3. Always be positive. This takes practice! Instead of, "That was really sloppy, let's do it better." Try this: "That's good! Now let's play better by doing such and such." Avoid words like "don't", "no", "bad", "awful". Always put it in a loving, positive framework, even if you have to fix something horrible. Always in the spirit of love.
4. A consistent practice time each day is helpful. You could split practice time into work time and play time. (nitty gritty practicing, then fun and games)
5. Listen to recordings of your child's pieces! Enjoy them together!
6. See all, ignore much. Pick only one thing at a time to work on.
7. Have a home concert once a week or every so often for family. Teddy bears make great audiences, too!
8. Allow the child to play through the entire piece at least once per practice session. This is her gift to you, and you need to stop, take the time to hear it, and appreciate it. Constant interruption or criticism only discourages.
9. If you acknowledge what your child did well, she will trust your judgment when it comes time to offer criticism. (After all, you noticed that she really nailed the three pigs section...)
10. After an actual performance (of any magnitude) please only give praise and positive comments. This was your child's offering and gift. Later you can discuss other points or issues.
11. Don't work ahead of your teacher's lessons. If you find yourself running out of material, do more repetitions! If you are truly moving quicker than your teacher, ask him/her for supplemental material. Chances are, you are missing details that need more practice time. However, it is easy for your teacher to increase the intensity if necessary.
12. Line up your child's favorite dolls or toys on a couch. Have him play a piece for each one.
13. Make a Bingo card with certain practice tasks on it. Allow your child to attempt to get a "Bingo" by doing each task in a row. You can take this a step further by drawing tasks from a hat, and the child must do the tasks, hoping he can get five in a row. If he gets Bingo in a single practice session, give a special reward.
14. Grant special privileges earned by practicing.
15. Have your child pick from a deck of cards, and repeat a technique or passage as many times as the card's value.
16. Use M&M's, chocolate chips, cheerios, raisins, etc. With every successful repetition, your child is rewarded with a goody. An unsuccessful repetition results in Mom or Dad eating the goody! Kids really get into this.
17. If your child plays something incorrectly or wrong, first praise her, then ask her to try to play it again even better. (Maybe offer a suggestion on what might make it better.)
18. Use coins. Add a penny for every successful repetition in a row. Have him deposit each coin into a piggy bank. Take the opportunity to make each repetition better.
19. Ask your child to be the teacher. Have her instruct you on how to play a piece or technique, and then have her demonstrate.
20. Record your child playing a piece. Have him critique the good and the bad.

21. Alter a board game like Candyland or Monopoly to use for review songs or practice tasks.
22. Celebrate graduating from a Suzuki book. (Make a favorite meal, bake a cake with the number of candles on it matching the Suzuki book number)
23. Arrange for your child to play duets with a friend or neighbor.
24. Listen to awesome violin music and other music. If you need recommendations, check this post at [Red Desert Violin](#), or ask your teacher.
25. Write the assignments to be practiced on pieces of paper and put them in a hat. You know the rest of this game!
26. Use dice to determine the number of repetitions on certain tasks. Feel free to cheat and have them roll 3 dice! You can also have the dice numbers correspond to tasks numbered on a piece of paper.
27. Make your own dice out of Styrofoam cubes from a craft store. Glue or write the tasks on each side of the dice.
28. Try baking a treat or favorite dish, but have your child “purchase” the ingredients by playing certain pieces. (Twinkle Variation A is worth 2 eggs if played correctly, etc.) It might be best to set aside the ingredients purchased by the child until practicing is all done and all ingredients are purchased. Then put the violin away and enjoy time together baking a treat.
29. Have your child play a different song in every room of the house. (They get a kick out of it if you include bathrooms and closets!)
30. Try drawing a mystery picture during a repetition practice. If your child needs to play a specific passage 10 times, make sure your picture has at least 10 parts. Let your child guess what the mystery picture is going to be. Mr. Potato Head or Cooties are other versions of this game.
31. During winter, fold some white paper, and allow the child to make a cut for each task completed. At the end of the practice session, hang up the snowflake. You can see how many snowflakes the child can make in December.
32. Try using play money from the dollar store or a monopoly game. Decide beforehand how much each measure or each song is worth. Let your child “purchase” items from your play music store once the set amount is earned. Have several small items to be purchased, such as lip gloss, silly putty, etc. I would allow your child to earn 1 item, for a set price. Make sure you charge enough money for the item that your child really puts in some good hard practice to earn it. I would use this game sparingly, because it verges on “bribes”, but if you handle it right, it falls under the category of games and incentives...I know...it's a thin line...
33. Ask your child to teach you to play the passage. Make sure they demonstrate.
34. When trying to extend your practice sessions longer, try making marks on a tall, thin candle. Light it and practice until the candle burns to the mark. Space it so that the candle will burn down in a week or two, then celebrate when you make it to the bottom of the candle. You could practice by candlelight, too! That's a fun twist!
35. Make a practice chart with fun stickers on it. Remember progress needs to be something your child can see and touch.



36. Stop practice sessions *before* the attention spans are gone. This is important to end on a good note.
37. Play “One Giant Step”. After he plays a piece or passage successfully, allow him to take one giant step, see how many steps it takes to get from point A to point B. (my house would be only one giant step...so choose this game accordingly...)
38. Play Tic Tac Toe, Hangman, or some other brief game. Every 7 minutes of practice, play a round! Eventually, you can go every 10 minutes, etc.
39. Younger children who are getting interested in money love this one: Once a month, you could have Nickel Day. For each piece played correctly, she gets a nickel. For really tough passages, you could have the stack of nickels sitting right where she can see them....very motivating!
40. Make a spinning wheel, or take one from an old board game. Put tasks or pieces on it. I like to combine this with cards. The child spins the spinner for the song, and draws a card for either the number of reps, or with a task written on it. For instance, the spinner lands on “Twinkle Variation A”, and the child draws a card that says, “Perfect Posture”. So the child will have to play all of Variation A with perfect posture. Later on, you can put two or three tasks on the same card and your child will be able to do it!

Please continue onto the next pages for bonus printable materials and other great stuff!

It has been a true pleasure creating this book to help violin students and parents. Are you ready to really invest in yourself and get top quality, structured lessons to help you take your playing to levels you have only dreamed of? Come visit me at RedDesertViolin.com. There you can explore my online lesson options, sign up for my newsletter, discover more resources and freebies, and join my online community of violin and fiddle students.

If you need a little inspiration to help you take the leap, here it is: Enter this code during the check-out process for any of the following courses, and receive 50% off your first month’s tuition! **“UltimateGuide50”**

[Red Desert Violin Book 1 \(Suzuki Book 1\)](#)

[Red Desert Violin Book 2 \(Suzuki Book 2\)](#)

[Red Desert Violin Book 3 \(Suzuki Book 3\)](#)

[Red Desert Fiddle](#)

[Wohlfahrt Opus 45](#)

Red Desert Violin Book 4 (Suzuki Book 4): coming soon!



Visit RedDesertViolin.com for more!

Bonus Materials

Free Stuff to Stick Up On Your Studio Wall!

- Skills Stack Menu for Effective, Focused Practicing
- Lesson Notes and Weekly Plan
- Daily Practice Worksheet



Visit RedDesertViolin.com for more!

“Skills Stack” Menu for Daily Practice

This ‘Skills Menu for Daily Practice’ is simply a list of many of the various skills you have acquired, or will soon acquire. It sometimes helps to have comprehensive list at your fingertips, so that when you are practicing, you can choose and keep track of the many tasks you have. Using this Menu, apply 1 task to any song, then add another task, and another, until you can manage ten tasks simultaneously with ease. Keeping this table handy in your practice room will help you practice more effectively and stay focused. Please write in more skills as you learn them. If you don’t know the skills listed yet, make a point of learning them, or visit RedDesertViolin.com.



Visit RedDesertViolin.com for more!

Posture and Form

Left Hand

- Thumb placement
- Index finger placement
- Pinky curved
- Pinky not in basement or fly away
- Wrist placement
- Holding violin, general posture

Right Hand

- Curved pinky
- Curved thumb
- Index finger on lapping
- Index finger pad on leather
- Middle and ring finger

Tone Quality

- Straight Bow
- Greasy Elbow
- Sounding Point (highway)
- Bow Weight vs. Bow Speed
- Tone Pie
- Add your own

Intonation

- Fingers on Tapes
- Fingers on Tapes quickly
- Fingers on Tapes no peeking
- Ringy Notes
- Tone Generator (drone pitch)
- Add your own

Clean Playing

- Fingers touch only 1 string
- Bow touches only 1 string
- String crossings are timely and accurate
- Elevator elbow
- Knuckles slant UP (pinky knuckle highest)
- Fingertips hit strings on "corners" or "Targets"
- Add your own

Intellectual Exercise

- Name the notes Add your own
- Name the finger pattern
- Name the key and finger pattern
- Name and Play "White" (Natural) Notes

Scales and Arpeggios

- Tapes Add your own
- Ringy Notes
- Key and finger pattern
- Name the Notes
- Twinkle Rhythms
- Skill Combinations

Ear Training

- Pitch Comparison Add your own
- Match That Pitch
- Name That Pitch (after matching it)
- Snippets

Reviewing Repertoire

- Skill Stacking Add your own
- Focus on 1 skill
- A List
- B List

Lesson Notes and Weekly Plan

Use this page to better capture what you learn in your lessons so that you can practice more effectively in the week that follows. Feel free to copy, shrink, or change this to suit your needs.

Ask if your teacher is willing to write their notes on this page for you. If not, don't stress. Write it down as soon as you get home, or during your lesson. It will be worth the time spent because these notes will aid you in organizing and focusing your practice time all week long!

Print multiple copies of this Lesson Notes document, and put one copy in between every 6 pages of your "Daily Practice Diary Worksheet," thereby forming a Practice Journal and Workbook, which will include a log of your practice, as well as a record of your lessons.

Lesson Notes and Weekly Plan

Twinkles	Tonalizations
Scale/Arpeggio	Technique Reminders / Skills to Work On
Review Pieces (Tips and Reminders)	New Piece Tips: Practice Spots:
Listening / Ear Training	Note Reading / Sight Reading

Daily Practice Diary and Worksheet

Below is your daily practice worksheet. Print it out, copy it, use one daily. It will help you to stay on task and to focus your practicing for RESULTS! All I ask is that you keep my web address visible when you photocopy this document.

As you set your daily practice goals and tasks, be sure to refer to your “Lesson Notes” worksheet so that you will base your daily practice on the things emphasized at your lesson, whether with a live teacher or online. Also, keep a copy of the “Skills and Tasks Menu” reference, and decide which skills you need on each section of your practice. Once you get the hang of it, you are welcome to change the worksheet or scrap it altogether! You don’t want to spend more time organizing and planning than you spend actually practicing!

Good luck, and happy practicing!



Visit RedDesertViolin.com for more!



www.RedDesertViolin.com

Daily Practice Worksheet

Date: _____

Scales: _____

Posture

Tone

Intonation

Clean Playing

Tapes

Note names

Finger patterns

—

Special skills needing work:

Intonation

Tapes

Tonalizations / Ringy notes

Pitch generator

New Song: _____

Goals Achieved? Y/N

Goals for today:

Y / N

Y / N

Y / N

Review Songs (have a printed list handy of A Songs and B songs. A songs are polished, B songs need work)

Skills to focus on while reviewing A songs:

B song tasks for today:

Note Reading / Sight Reading

Tasks achieved? Y / N

Tasks:

Ear Training: (Mark which exercises you did, and how it went)

Note comparison _____

Match that pitch _____

Name that pitch (after you match it): _____

Snippets _____

Other _____