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Music Lessons Boost Your Child's Brainpower

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Q: What are the benefits of enrolling my 10-year-old in an after-school music program? Will it help her in other areas the way sports activities offer additional benefits like learning about competition?

A: Good question. Remember "The Mozart Effect"? That was the nifty notion that parents could boost their baby's IQ just by playing a little "Nachtmusik." The claim sold millions of music CDs and led many hospitals -- not to mention the state health departments in Georgia and Tennessee -- to issue recordings to all new parents. Well, roll over, Mozart -- and make way for the "Music Lesson Effect."

Experts now say that listening to classical music affects baby's memory for mere minutes. But more and more studies suggest that learning to play an instrument or to sing has sizable long-term benefits for kids and teens.

Some of the evidence:

A study of 237 second graders by researchers at the University of California, Irvine, found that those who got music instruction scored 27 percent higher on a fractions test than those who lacked instruction. In a recent analysis by the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, band and orchestra members were less likely than other kids to smoke, drink alcohol, or experiment with drugs. And when the Princeton, NJ-based College Entrance Examination Board looked at the SAT scores of college-bound high school seniors, they discovered that musicians scored 57 points higher on the test's verbal section and 41 points higher in math. Think all this just shows that music makers are motivated types? Not so fast. Researchers found academic gains even in kids assigned to music lessons and groups.

SAT scores aside, the best reason to encourage your child to learn an instrument is because it's fun and rewarding, says Mark Churchill, dean of the preparatory school at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. "Every kid -- and grown-up -- is affected by music," he says. "It's part of what makes us human. Playing music makes children happy, and happy children learn and get along with others much better."

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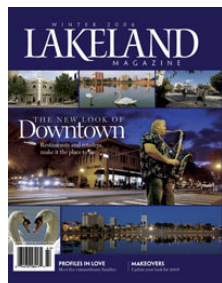
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Yet a 2003 Gallup Poll found that less than half of all lesson takers stick with it through high school. Use these expert tips to get your child to try an instrument -- and to keep her hooked.

Perk up her ears

Start early to expose your child to a wide variety of music to build her listening skills and lay the groundwork for learning to play an instrument later. Borrow CDs -- bebop to Bach -- from the library, listen to the radio, and go to concerts. Spark her interest in learning an instrument by signing up for a music and movement class in which preschoolers sing, march, and play with rhythms. By age 3 or 4, most kids can begin formal lessons using the Suzuki method, which has a child learning to play music by listening and imitating what she hears -- in much the same natural way she learns to talk.

Pick an instrument with a quick musical payoff

For children younger than 10, who can be easily discouraged, the piano is a classic starting point, because it allows them to produce a sound right away. A recorder or a pint-size violin or cello is a good alternative: These instruments let a child focus on playing just the melody instead of melody plus chords at the same time, as on a keyboard.

After about age 10, most kids are big enough and have the dexterity to play most band or orchestra instruments. To help your child choose one, take her to concerts so that she can see and hear the different types. Look for an "instrument petting zoo" where kids can toot their own horn at festivals, children's concerts, shopping malls, or local music schools.

Once the selection is made, choose the best-quality instrument you can afford to prevent unnecessary frustration, says Wilma Machover, director of artistic programs at the Hoff-Barthelson Music School in Scarsdale, NY, and author of "Sound Choices: Guiding Your Child's Musical Experiences." Reasonable rentals are usually available at music stores -- or even your child's school.

Sound out a teacher

Get recommendations from friends, neighbors, and the music teacher at school, and check references before signing up. Observe how your child gets along with the teacher, says Churchill. Is she paying attention and cooperating? Good sign. Is she having fun? Even better.

Help with the homework

Decide on a regular time for daily practice -- whether it's 10 minutes for a 6-year-old or 2 hours for a serious teen violinist. Set up a distraction-free music corner in your home, away from blaring TVs, computers, and ringing telephones. For kids younger than 10, stay in the room -- practicing can be lonely.

Encourage older kids to keep track of time and start on their own.

"For the first few years, my mom would ask me if I wanted to practice," says Devon Nelson, 18, an accomplished high school bassoonist from East Orleans, Mass., who plays with the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra. "If I didn't want to, that was OK. Sometimes I got to my lessons not fully prepared -- and I learned the consequences of not practicing for myself."

Make music social

Ask your child's teacher about opportunities in community bands, choruses, or orchestras. If your child is older than 9 or 10, consider a music camp, too.

Bring the fun home

If your child is outgoing -- or an outright ham -- ask her to play a favorite piece when a friend or relative visits.

"If you can," says Machover, "pick up an instrument and join in."

Sound advice for sour notes

Learning music is hard enough -- don't let a loud or awkward instrument pose an added challenge. Here are ways to make playing easy.

PROBLEM: You have no room for a piano

SOLUTION: Keyboard with keys that simulate a piano's action

PROBLEM: A neighbor is touchy

SOLUTION: Mutes for the drum set to dampen the sound

PROBLEM: Your child's lips get chafed when the mouthpiece of a trumpet or other brass instrument pushes against braces

SOLUTION: Lip protector that fits over braces

PROBLEM: It's hard to maneuver an enormous double bass

SOLUTION: Wheel that fits into the endpin hole, allowing your child to lean the bass against his shoulder and roll it

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