

MINI ESSAY 1: RELATING TO CHILDREN

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Much of my philosophy of relating to children comes from the work of Dr. Karyn Purvis, Director of the Institute of Child Development at Texas Christian University. She and her colleagues work mainly with post-institutionalized children adopted from orphanages. They help these children heal from their pasts and bond with their families. (Reading about orphans is one of my hobbies.) I am happy to say that most of my students have not been traumatized or institutionalized. Yet the concepts Dr. Purvis presents in her writings are based on common sense concepts that are healthy for all children. Three ideas presented by Dr. Purvis that I have adapted for use with my piano students are:

- Playful Engagement
- Shared Control
- Preciousness of each child

Playful Engagement

In their early years, children learn about the world through play. Therefore, relating to children in a playful manner is the most effective way to teach piano to young children. Most children have a great sense of humor. In the lesson, I am constantly making jokes, creating analogies or stories with the student to bring out the character of a particular piece, and singing silly lyrics. This makes the lesson a playful time in the child's week and helps the student and I develop a joyful camaraderie as we focus together on studying music at the piano.

One example of this playful engagement is when I wanted to assign Oscar Fernandez' piece, "Pastorale," from *Suite on Five Notes*, to my student Allison. I knew that this piece would be a musical stretch for her, because it is in Lydian mode, the print is very small in the book, and it looks complicated because of the sixteenth notes. So while I played the piece for her, I sang, "Eating all my broccoli. I'm eating all my broccoli. Eating all my broccoli. It tastes really bad!" Voila. She loved the piece, was not put off by the modal sound, and played it with energy. **Playful Engagement** makes piano study joyful for the student and teacher.

Shared Control

No one likes to have things in life that are completely out of our control. If we are allowed choices to keep some control, we are able to function with less anxiety, and therefore, more willing to work hard. In my studio I use **Shared Control** in three ways:

- **Practice Control.** I let the student choose whether we should use the **Minutes System** or the **Smiley System** for accountability in practice. (See **Mini Essay 2: Should Piano Study be Fun, and are Sticker Charts Bad?** for a description of these practice systems.)
- **Learning Control.** When introducing a new piece, I ask, "Do you want to play this again, or do you think you know it well enough to practice at home?" This helps me gauge how confident the student feels with new pieces. It also allows the student to understand his own learning process and ask for help if he needs it.

- **Piece Control.** I let the student decide which completed pieces to keep as **Review Pieces** and how long to keep them. I also provide choices when choosing repertoire. For example, I play several sonatinas, all of which I approve for the student to study, and let the student decide which he likes best. One of the joys of teaching piano is that we have a vast repertoire of music to choose from. Therefore, if a student really dislikes a piece, we can replace it with an equivalent he likes better.
- **Assignment Control.** I ask during the lesson, "Are there enough pieces on your assignment, or would you like more?" I have found that students will tell me the truth. If a student feels like he has reached his limit, he will say, "Enough." If he thinks he might be bored, he says, "More." This helps me gauge what each individual student can handle and pace the progress of each student appropriately. If an assignment is overwhelming, the student will feel defeated before the first practice session. If the assignment is too easy, the student will not spend enough time at the piano. I also have found that a student who always says, "Enough," will, at a certain point, start feeling confident enough to say, "More," as he progresses through a level. This is one way I know I can start introducing pieces at the next level. Students learn in steep inclines and plateaus, not in a steady upward progression. Giving a student some control over his assignment provides me with understanding about when the student is in a learning incline ("More!") and when he is in a plateau and needs to soak in pieces at that level ("Enough").
- **Teacher Happy Choices.** I give the student choices throughout the lesson, making sure I am happy with all the options I present. This means that I do not say, "Would you like to play this again?" if I want the student to play a piece again, since the student might say, "No," which is not a choice I am happy with. Instead, I say, "We are going to play this piece again. Would you like to play it high or low or in the middle of the piano?" I am happy with whichever option the student chooses. In addition, I give the student choices of stickers, choices of colors of pencils, freedom to choose which book we start with in the lesson, and many other choices.

Preciousness

According to <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2002/HowManyPeopleHaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx>, scientists estimate that **107,602,707,791** have lived on Earth since the beginning. Of these 107,602,707,791 people, the child I have on my piano bench at any given moment is the *only one* of that specific human that has ever existed. This means that even though my student Sarah is sometimes difficult to teach, she is extremely precious since she is the only Sarah who has ever existed. Other people named Sarah are not the same Sarah. She is the only one! Keeping the preciousness and uniqueness of each child in mind makes it easier to love each child and devote that lesson time to doing the best I can for that child. As piano teachers, we have an important place in a child's life as a caring adult who sees that child in a focused individual session every week for years on end. Rarely does a child have anyone else like that in her life. I have a prime opportunity each week to remind my students just how loved and precious they are by teaching them to the best of my ability, showing them kindness, and being interested in what they say.