



Starting Band Successfully - Helping Your Child Succeed in Beginning Band

By Christina Thompson

The first few days of band class can be very exciting--choosing the perfect instrument, meeting new friends, and feeling the rush of trying something new. But soon, it becomes time for your child to settle into the routine of learning to play an instrument. For many beginning band students, knowing how to begin a musical endeavor can be very confusing; likewise, many new band parents are unsure how to help their child succeed. In this article, you'll learn more about how band class works and discover simple ways you can give your child a great experience in band.

Band is a unique class that teaches students how to play music from the ground up. Learning in band class is mainly experiential, so instead of doing worksheets and watching videos about music, your child will learn music by doing things musicians do. In a good band program, your child can expect to perform alone and with a group, compose, improvise, play different musical styles, and perform for an audience. The band director is usually an expert musician herself, and she acts as a coach and guide, introducing students to musical skills and guiding them toward greater understanding.

Since performance is at the heart of band, in many bands your child will be graded on his playing and expected to play alone in class. Many band directors hold playing tests, during which each student plays an assigned piece during class and the director listens for progress and understanding. It's also very common for directors to ask individuals or small groups to play in class, and give suggestions to help the students improve. Resist the urge to complain if your child is asked to play alone in class--remember, your child is in band to learn to be a musician, and musicians perform in front of people! Instead, prepare your child for performances by having informal "concerts" at your house often, asking your child to play something for the family and responding with warmth and encouragement. If your child practices regularly and is used to having an audience, playing in class will be much easier.

Experiential learning isn't limited only to band class; it's in the homework as well. So, when your child has band homework, expect to hear some noise! In class, the director introduces musical skills and coaches students toward making progress. However, many of these skills can't be learned by hearing a lecture; your child has to actually train her body and mind to be able to perform the skill. Since band class is only so many minutes long, much of this training must be done through regular practice at home.

One way to make practice easier is to encourage your child to find a place and time to practice each day. A good place will be comfortable, quiet, and distraction-free, and equipped with a posture-supporting chair, a music stand, and plenty of light. Determine

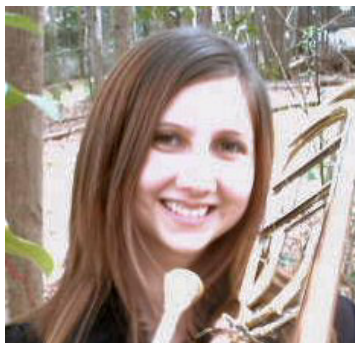
with your child when a good time to practice will be, and help him stick to that time each day. Taking weekends off is fine, but encouraging regular practice will help your child improve more quickly, play more confidently, and discover the value of perseverance.

Even after your child finds a practice spot, she may have no idea what to practice. Because children learn naturally through play, "playing around" can be a great way to get started. Encourage your child to begin learning about her instrument by trying different lip positions, seeing how many notes she can learn, or creating her own song. These creations may not sound like beautiful music, but the act of experimenting activates your child's evaluation and problem-solving skills, and makes learning a difficult instrument "child's play." As the year progresses, your band director will assign specific songs for your child to practice each day; together with your child, try creating a practice routine that includes both working on the assignment and time to play around.

Even if you don't read music, you can still help your child practice effectively. The key is asking questions and encouraging your child to use resources like his band book to work through the problem. If your child is frustrated with a note, ask him to pinpoint the problem note and look it up in his fingering chart. Located in the back of most band books, fingering charts show the note name, how it's written, and the combination of fingers required to play it. This is excellent strategy that can strengthen your child's independent learning skills. Asking your child to explain a problem or encouraging him to create small, attainable goals also can make musical problems easier to fix. If a problem isn't solved by the end of the practice session, remind your child that the band director can help the next day in class.

Possibly the best way to help your child succeed musically is to shift your focus from mistakes to progress, and encourage your child to do the same. Even though your child will not play everything perfectly, you will be able to hear her strengths and progress over time. Encouraging your child to focus on her improvements can give her a healthy concept of progress--and encourage her to make more of it!

Using the tips outlined in this article, you can help your child find success and fun in beginning band. Even if you know nothing about music, use your child's experience as a chance to learn. The more interest you take in helping your child succeed, the more fulfilling and enjoyable your child's musical journey will be.



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