

Teaching piano to young beginners

Helen Reid

Introduction

From a very early stage, babies respond to music, and there are many opportunities for toddlers not only to enjoy singing and developing their own sense of rhythm, but also to see and hear music making at children's concerts in an informal and happy context. It may then be a short step from there to their own desire to join in, perhaps marking the beginning of a lifetime of music making, bringing enjoyment, challenges and spiritual and cultural enrichment.

Moreover, it's widely recognised that learning to play a musical instrument is a very effective way to train the brain, developing transferrable skills. A child who starts at the keyboard is in a good position to choose a different or an additional instrument later.

This resource focuses primarily on teaching piano to younger beginners. It explores the right time to start learning an instrument, teaching notation and rhythm, forming a sound technical basis, lesson structure, practice, incorporating creativity and improvisation into lessons, and responding to the individual. A holistic approach to teaching is advocated, developing musicianship and a love of music, as well as pianistic skills.

What age to start?

The demands for a young child of learning to play the piano are both mental and physical. Matching what the fingers will do in response to what the brain understands is a complex process, and the co-ordination that's required demands some degree of maturity. The teacher needs to be acutely aware of 'where the child is' in their development so that they can proceed accordingly.

For formal individual lessons, it's realistic to start around the ages of six to nine. By then, children are likely to have settled at school, begun to read, be able to cope with some extra activities, and find time to practise. Above all, they should be keen to learn to play the piano. Older children often make quicker progress, so it's worth waiting until a child shows a real interest in learning. However, if a parent is very enthusiastic and committed for a younger child who is singing in tune, perhaps picking out nursery rhymes on the keyboard and clapping in time to music, you may have lots of fun and success with them.

Bear in mind, too, that young children may not be able to cope with all the demands made upon them, both physically and mentally, when they begin piano lessons. When children begin to learn an instrument, they are being asked to read and count the rhythms, which requires mathematical understanding; to read the notes to which the rhythms are assigned; and to produce the note, requiring physical co-ordination and dexterity, which children develop at different rates.

A child who wants to play, but does not yet have the physical development to do so, will easily (and understandably) become frustrated with the instrument, or with themselves. Their feet may not reach the floor, but stability and proper posture are essential – a small footstool solves the problem. Little fingers, especially the fourth and fifth fingers, may not have the strength and independence to press the notes.

If you're teaching younger children, in the first instance you can incorporate more general musicianship into your lessons, with just a little actual piano playing. This is crucially important in developing a well-rounded musician in any case, and will probably mean that they progress more quickly when they're physically able to produce more notes.

A child will learn much more easily, and with more understanding, if the elements mentioned above are broken down. While there are many good piano books for children beginners, there is groundwork that can be done by the teacher before starting to work with a tutor book. They will then approach the book with more confidence and musicality, and probably more success, than if coming to it from cold.

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Teaching rhythm

We should aim for children to develop and externalise their innate sense of rhythm – a *feeling* for rhythm and pulse. Too often, children are able to count two beats for a minim and one beat for a crotchet, but without really feeling the musicality and pulse of the beat/bar/passage as a whole.

Before you start reading any rhythms, you could ask the children to move to the music. This is something they will have done naturally since they were little, and it is important to nurture this skill as they progress through their instrumental learning. Play them a march and ask them to march round the room, or on the spot. Play them a waltz and show them how to move in three time. If they find this difficult, then play a recording of a march or a waltz and do the exercise with them.

This waltz exercise is especially useful, as children often find it tricky to move from playing in four time to playing in three time. Away from the piano, you could also sing a well-known song with them and march in different pulses. For example, sing ‘The Grand Old Duke of York’ together, and march round the room in a slow minim pulse (‘ta-ah’); a crotchet pulse (‘ta’); and a fast quaver pulse (‘ti-ti’).

Once children start to read rhythm patterns, it’s best to use **sounds** to represent note values. For example:

- ▶ Crotchet = ta
- ▶ Minim = ta-ah
- ▶ Two quavers = ti-ti

The use of the natural stress of different words to read rhythmic patterns is a useful tool as rhythms become more complex. For example:

- ▶ One quaver + two semiquavers = grasshopper.
- ▶ Two quavers + one crotchet = coffee tea.

In this way, children should be able to learn to clap rhythmic patterns quite quickly and with confidence. Only when children are secure in translating rhythmic patterns on the page into sounds and/or movements is it time to introduce counting.

Show them, away from the piano, that the minim equals two beats, the crotchet equals one beat, and so on. Ask them to make up their own bars, writing them down together, with three or four beats in each. The children can then practise clapping them. Once they’re happily clapping the rhythms, let them choose any note on the piano and play their own rhythms on this note. As well as learning to read rhythm, you are helping them to create their own music from the very start of their musical journey.

Teaching notation

Approaching the piano

I always remember a lovely little girl looking down at the piano, having been asked to find a D, and saying, with some despair: ‘But they all look the same!’

It’s sensible to give children an understanding of the whole geography of the keyboard before they start to read any music. Ask the child to find a high note, a black note, a low note, two notes together, a note with the left hand, a note with the right hand – a growly bear-like note, or a squeaky mouse note – the possibilities are endless, and fun.

In order to distinguish the individual notes, ask the child first to find all the sets of two black notes, followed by all the sets of three black notes. They may not find this as easy as you would think. You can then show them where C is, and see if they can find all the Cs on the piano, using the groups of black notes as an anchor. Even once they start to read music, come back to this exercise as a fun warm-up at the start of the lesson.

Notation

By now, the child should have an idea of the geography of the keyboard, and how to read rhythm, so they should be well equipped to begin reading music notation. Here also, work can be done together before beginning a tutor book.

Take a sheet of manuscript paper and ask the child to write out a couple of bars of 4/4. This is a task they will already be familiar with. Then, show them what a middle C looks like on the manuscript, and write out the rhythm again, but this time on middle C. Now ask them to play it. You could repeat this exercise on middle C, with a different rhythm, or move on to include D as well, in the right hand. Emphasise that they are writing their own music, and playing their first pieces of music!

Many children begin the piano because they want to play tunes they've heard and, although this can take a while, they will be encouraged by the fact that they're already playing tunes they've composed themselves. You could ask them to suggest names for their tunes. Using animals is often a good place to start if they're not sure about a name.

Again, this is an activity you can return to at any point. If the music uses finger numbers, a child can easily start to read the finger numbers instead of the notes, leading to difficulties once they move out of their first hand position. Returning to these activities, as well as trying not to write in too many finger numbers, should ensure that the children are really learning to read the notes.

Early technique

It's never too early to form a solid technical base. It's also helpful to show children not only *that* it's important to play with curved fingers, but *why* this is the case. I always demonstrate a fast scale with flat fingers – very hard to do! – and then a fast scale with curved fingers. They love seeing somebody play quickly, and can instantly see why they are being asked to curve their fingers.

Try to make sure they keep their shoulders and wrists relaxed, but their fingers firm. Again, if they're little, they may try and compensate for less developed strength in their fingers by tensing their shoulders and arms. Remember that a footstool should be provided, so that the children have a good supported posture when they play, before they can touch the floor.

Lesson structure and resources

Piano teachers are often in the privileged position of giving individual lessons, so they're able to formulate their lesson plans and their approach to suit the particular learner. Although one-to-one lessons mean that the teacher is able to go off at a tangent to follow a learner's particular interest, there should always be a focus to the lesson.

As a general rule, a lesson for a beginner student could cover the following:

- ▶ A warm-up – as well as warming up the fingers, this section of the lesson can warm up the brain and the ear! Use this time to find different notes on the piano; to use flashcards for note recognition and reading; to play some rhythm copying games; and to use your rhythm flashcards for reading rhythms.
- ▶ Listening to the piece that the child has practised during the week.
- ▶ Introducing a new piece/a new concept and working through it together.
- ▶ Recapping a previous piece or exercise.
- ▶ Improvisation, listening or a fun music game.
- ▶ Writing some of your own music together.
- ▶ Recapping what you have done in the lesson and what you expect the child to practise for the next week. If possible, it's helpful for the parent to be in the lesson at this point (see Practice guidance below).

It's a good idea not to commit to a specific tutor book until you've come to know the child a little. Have a stock of possible first tutors and lend out the one you think is going to suit best. There is a vast choice available. Consider what you like the look of, and what you think your pupil's reaction might be. Here are a few suggestions, but the list is far from exhaustive:

- ▶ *Alfred's Basic Piano Library* and *Alfred's Premier Piano Course*
- ▶ *Bastien Piano Library* and *Bastien Piano Basics*
- ▶ Ann Bryant: *Keyclub*
- ▶ Pauline Hall: *Tunes for Ten fingers* (for young beginners)
- ▶ Pauline Hall: *Piano Time* (for older children)
- ▶ Karen Marshall and Heather Hammond: *Get Set! Piano*
- ▶ Alan Haughton: *Play Piano*
- ▶ Hans-Günter Heumann: *Piano Junior*
- ▶ Joanna MacGregor PianoWorld: *Saving the Piano*
- ▶ *Thompson's Easiest Piano Course*
- ▶ Fanny Waterman: *Me and My Piano* (for young beginners)
- ▶ Fanny Waterman and Marion Harewood: *Piano Lessons* (for older children)

Other useful resources that are worth investing in include:

- ▶ **Duet books:** these are great for motivation, fun to play and a good way to develop listening skills.
- ▶ **Flashcards:** a good basic set of flashcards, for note and rhythm learning, are produced by Hal Leonard, but there are also many available online. These can be a fun way to learn and consolidate note finding and naming, as well as to work on rhythmic patterns.
- ▶ **Manuscript paper.**
- ▶ **Reward stickers.**
- ▶ A book of **simple Christmas tunes.**

Practice guidance

Your expectations for practice between lessons must be clear. At the beginner level, little and often is the best way to progress. Five minutes a day is a good start. Studies have shown that, at a young age, parental support is vital to the child's progress, so advise parents to sit with their children while they practise.

If the grown-up is not sitting in on the lesson, take a few minutes at the end of the lesson to explain what you've covered and what you'd like the child to work on. If you're teaching in a school, this is not usually possible. In this case (and in any case), clear notes in a piano notebook are vital. A practice chart for each day of the week is helpful for motivation, so that the child can record practices with a tick or a sticker. I recommend to parents that children practise at the same time each day, so that practice becomes a part of everyday routine just like cleaning their teeth.

As children progress, the pieces become harder, and the practice time becomes longer, it's important to remember that practice really is an art in itself and that the teaching of how to practice should form part of every lesson.

The following guidelines for practising can be applied to every stage of learning:

- ▶ Before you start to play a piece, do you know what you want to achieve? Are you using the piece as a warm-up? Are you working slowly on evenness or fingering? Are you trying to play through without stopping, or give a performance of the piece?
- ▶ 'Jigsaw' practice is very useful. This involves practising different sections of a piece and then putting them together. Focus on the challenging parts of the piece first, and then start to put different sections together. If a similar section occurs more than once – in a different key, for example – then practise these sections one after another.
- ▶ Practice with your mood. This also goes for teaching a lesson. If you can tell that a child is feeling a bit tired or finding something hard, perhaps revisit a piece they know well, to give their confidence a boost. It's always nice to see that something you once found hard is now much easier. At the start of practice, when the focus is greatest, turn straight to the most challenging parts of the pieces and tackle those. Allow the children to play through something they really enjoy as a reward at the end of the hard work.

Encouraging creativity and imagination

The best music lessons are those that produce well-rounded musicians, as well as proficient pianists. To this end, it's lovely if you can encourage creativity in your lessons and access the imagination of the children.

A nice way to do this is to play to the child each lesson. Ask them how your music makes them feel, and what it makes them think of. If they find this hard, then make your questions a bit more focused – which animal does this remind you of? Do you think this music is happy or sad? Is the music fast or slow? It's very important to emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers.

Ask them to conduct you when you play. Children are so thrilled when they can be in control of the music. The child can make the music faster or slower by moving their hands faster or slower, or they could make the music louder or softer by placing their hands together or opening their hands wide.

Encourage improvisation: you could play a basic chord pattern and give the child a few notes to focus on, which they can play in any order and at any time. Improvisation using only the black notes will always sound good. If you're a more confident improviser, you could pick a theme for your improvisation, such as the weather, or a story.

Responding to the individual

Not all successful pianists follow the same route, and one of the joys of teaching is spotting what might be causing a hiccup in a pupil's progress, and then being able to tailor your response to the individual child.

Teachers of young beginners have a special responsibility in this area. Consider the child who finds it difficult to relate the vertical stave to the horizontal keyboard; who plays well by ear, but struggles to read notation; or who struggles to find the notes on the piano, despite being able to read them quite happily on the page. You may encounter these different issues and more, and they require careful and sensitive reactions.

Few children are going to go on to become professional concert pianists. It's important to be led by their ambition and interests, and above all, to engender a love of music through a holistic and positive approach to your work.