

Teaching Growth Mindset Feedback to Suzuki Parents

By Aubrey Faith-Slaker

As I shepherd children through the joyous, challenging, and meaningful venture of Suzuki piano study, I've had the opportunity to witness the phases families go through as they advance through the repertoire, as their children gain experience as musicians, and as they all grow together as learners, from the timid but enthusiastic beginner to the Twinkle-weary child preparing his Book One recital; from the child who has just muscled his way through the Book Four Bach to the one breezing through Book Five like his fingers can't get enough. Along the way I've found that there are times when additional parent support or education needs to be infused into the family's experience. And that needs to come from me. I need to recognize it, I need to anticipate it, and I need to be creative about it. Parents play a huge role in the experience children have of music study—to the benefit or the detriment of the child's persistence and success—and it's up to me as the teacher to make sure they are prepared.

In the past I've toyed with several fun ways to give parents the support, motivation, and confidence they need to keep things going at home between lessons. Sometimes I have parents come in for the lesson one week without their child and we go over—at the piano—what they can be doing to support their child's practice at home in a more meaningful way. Sometimes I have parents swap with other parents in lessons so they're taking notes for someone else's child for the week (boy, are those notes detailed!). Most often though, parent education ends up coming out in short bursts through gentle reminders or pointed comments at the end of a lesson or via email. And I'd much rather devote more time to such an essential aspect of the Suzuki method!

I'm trying now to bring the parents in my studio together in their commitment to

Suzuki studies—to get them all working toward the same goals no matter at what level their child is studying. This past summer I gave the parents of my students a challenge: to only use growth mindset related feedback with their children when it comes to their piano practice at home.

If you haven't read Carol Dweck's book *Mindset*, I highly recommend it—for those of you who are teachers and definitely for those of you who are parents! Dweck explains that a growth mindset is the underlying belief that abilities can be developed through effort and practice. Children with a

growth mindset persist longer and succeed more frequently in the face of challenges, because they understand that effort and hard work can change not only ability but intelligence in certain areas. On the contrary, a fixed mindset is the belief that intelligence is static and cannot be changed. When children are operating in a fixed mindset, they tend to give up easily when they encounter obstacles because they believe that they don't have what it takes to learn hard things. Their initial struggle turns them away from pursuing the development of the ability in front of them.

Children with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be developed. These students see school and extracurricular activities as a place to develop their abilities and they think of challenges as opportunities to grow. Children with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence is something they either have or they don't. These students see school as a place where their abilities are evaluated, they focus on looking smart over learning, and they interpret mistakes as a sign that they lack talent.

Parents play a huge role in influencing and nurturing the mindsets of their children, so it's important for them to model a growth mindset at home and in lessons. When parents are able to show their children that they are excited by challenges, see mistakes as learning opportunities, and understand the value of practice and especially trying different strategies, they are able to develop and nurture their children's growth mindsets!

We're taught, as Suzuki teachers, to give extremely specific feedback. ("Congratulations on those clear notes in your left hand ascending scales!") If we can take that a step further and make sure to incorporate specific feedback on the effort that went into the success of those left hand ascending scales ("Congratulations on all the work you did this week on your left hand ascending scales! You must have done some of that staccato practice we tried in our last lesson!") the feedback will be more meaningful and result in better practice the following week. Since it is most certainly the effort that the child is thinking about, it is the effort that we should notice.

And when parents begin to congratulate their children on the effort they are putting into their practice, admiring the use of different methods their children are implementing from lessons, and focusing on the progress they're making, children blossom and become excited

to try new challenges and are more proud of themselves for overcoming difficulties. They also become more independent at the instrument because of their confidence in working things out on their own and they're much more excited to come in and show me what they've accomplished. I guarantee when they come in to lesson, it isn't the finished result that they have internalized, but all the work that it took!

I have introduced this approach to my parents in several ways, starting with simple demonstration in lessons. In looking to make this more of a formal parent-support initiative, I have put together a handout, had casual discussion in lesson on the handout, and answered any questions they might have. I have posted the enterprise on my website and am challenging

them to try to stick to growth mindset language with their children when it comes to their piano practice. Here is a list of options I have offered them to help guide them in this new growth-minded feedback experiment. I can't wait to see where this takes us further down the road! For now, though, they're excited to have a new system in place that makes sense and are glad to infuse their regular practice routine with something novel. 🌟

Carol Dweck, a member of the SAA Honorary Board, first introduced her idea to Suzuki teachers in a keynote presentation at the 2008 SAA Conference.

Notes

1. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).



Pianist **Aubrey Faith-Slaker** is an established and dedicated music educator in the Chicagoland area, teaching students ages three and up in English and in Spanish using both Suzuki and traditional methods. She has maintained a flourishing piano studio in Texas, Wyoming, Colorado, and currently Chicago, teaching piano, music history, music theory, and piano pedagogy to students of all ages. Aubrey also works mentoring new teachers in piano pedagogy practices, pursuing further education, and starting their own businesses. Aubrey teaches masterclasses in Chicago and Latin America, is MTNA certified, and is a Suzuki Piano Teacher Trainer Candidate. Having studied music therapy in graduate school, Aubrey continues to research and explore music study as a means of healing.

Growth Mindset Feedback

Words to use with your children as they practice their instrument at home

Let's start by first noticing and praising the effort that your child has put into what he is working on. Here is a list of growth-minded praise to use:

- You are on the right track!
- You're definitely putting in the time and effort to improve on this!
- Good job sticking with it and not giving up when it got challenging!
- You've made a lot of progress on this today!
- Good job thinking about other ways to work on this!
- I'm impressed with how you didn't quit and tried the next bit!
- I'm proud of you for asking for help when needed, but trying on your own first!
- I see that you're doing your best!
- Good job being in charge of your own practicing!

- That was beautiful.
- And keep in mind when you're working with your child: You don't know whether you're good at something until you've put in the effort. Up until that point, you're still learning!

If your child says...

1. I'm not good at this.
2. I can't make it any better.
3. This is too hard.
4. I'm making so many mistakes!
5. I can't do this.

Try saying...

1. You're not good at it YET!
2. Improving takes time!
3. This may take some time.
4. Every mistake is helping you learn.
5. You're training your brain to do it!