

Piano Practice Pointers for Parents

Learning the piano is an arduous task, and students of every age and skill level struggle to understand and apply effective practicing methods. Without a teacher present, it is often daunting for parents to help their children develop good practice habits, particularly if the students have trouble reading or remembering their assignments. The purpose of this guide is to provide parents with practical knowledge to help their children practice effectively at home. No prior knowledge of music theory will be assumed. As always, feel free to contact me directly if you have additional questions!

Piano Posture

The first thing I teach beginning students is the proper posture and hand position at the piano. These may seem trivial in the grand scheme of learning the piano, but they are vital for creating a comfortable and sustainable practice environment. Proper hand placement will also aid students in playing with correct fingering and avoiding unnecessary tension in the hands and arms. While practicing, students should sit tall on the front half of the piano bench with their elbows by their sides (their feet do not have to reach the pedals). Their arms should be parallel to the floor and their fingers should naturally curl into a “C” shape, as if they were holding a ball in each hand.



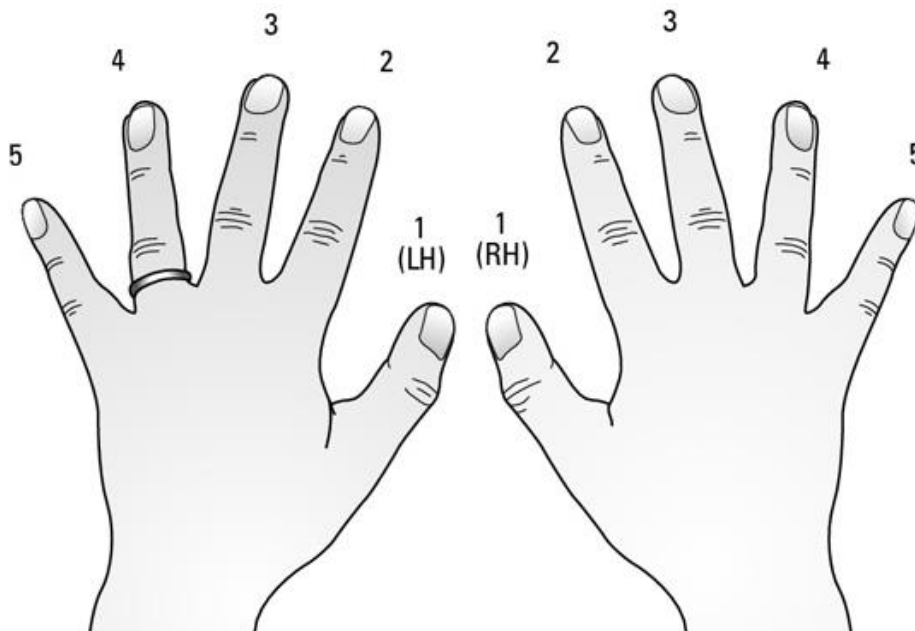
Correct Posture at the Piano



Correct Hand Position

Fingering





Fingering is a numerical method of referencing particular fingers for performance. Using correct fingering can be annoying to young students who want to play through their assigned pieces quickly, but it's important that the correct fingers are used to develop dexterity and independence in each finger. The fingering convention used for piano is shown in the following image:



Fingering for Left and Right Hands

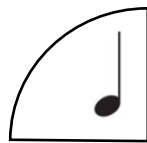
Timing and Rhythm

Rhythm refers to a system of repeated beats that form the structure of music. The length of time a particular note should be held is equivalent to the number of beats it has. There are four basic types of notes used in piano music, each with its own beat value:

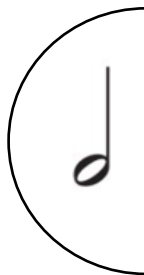
Note	Name	Beats
	Whole note	4 beats
	Half note	2 beats
	Quarter note	1 beat
	Eighth note	1/2 beat

The Four Basic Note Types and Durations

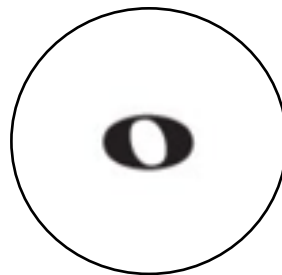
Beginning students will primarily deal with the first three notes, since the speed of most beginning songs (called the **tempo**), is fairly slow. If a student has a difficult time remembering the timings of each note, it may be helpful to show them with a pie diagram, such as this:



Quarter Note



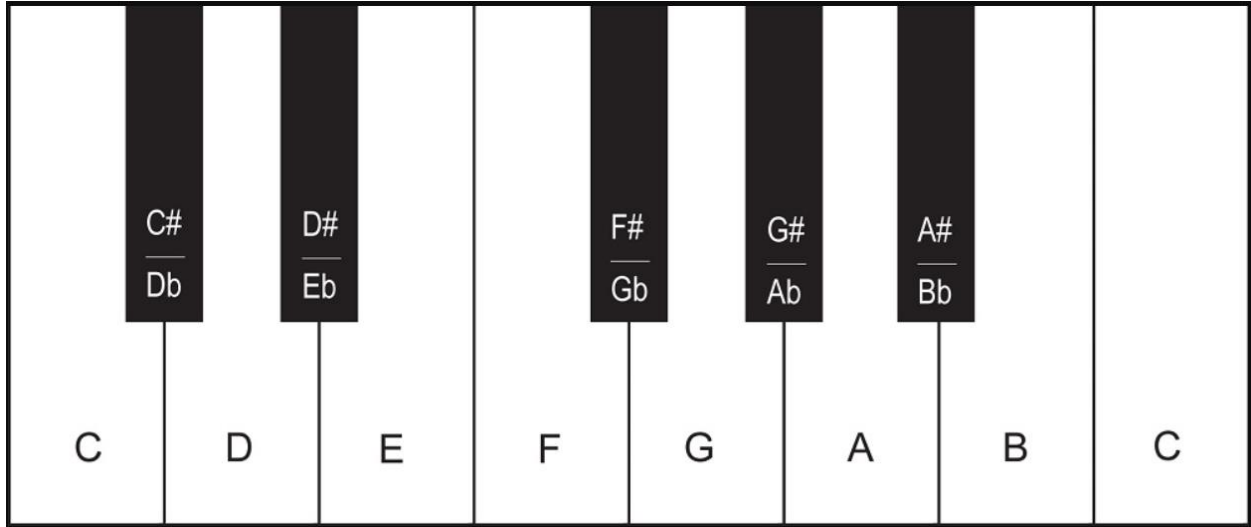
Half Note



Whole Note

Keys and Music Notation

The next most important element in learning piano is recognizing note names. Although there are many keys on the keyboard (88 to be exact), there are only 12 unique notes that repeat in higher or lower **octaves**. These 12 notes are shown in the image below:



One Octave on the Piano

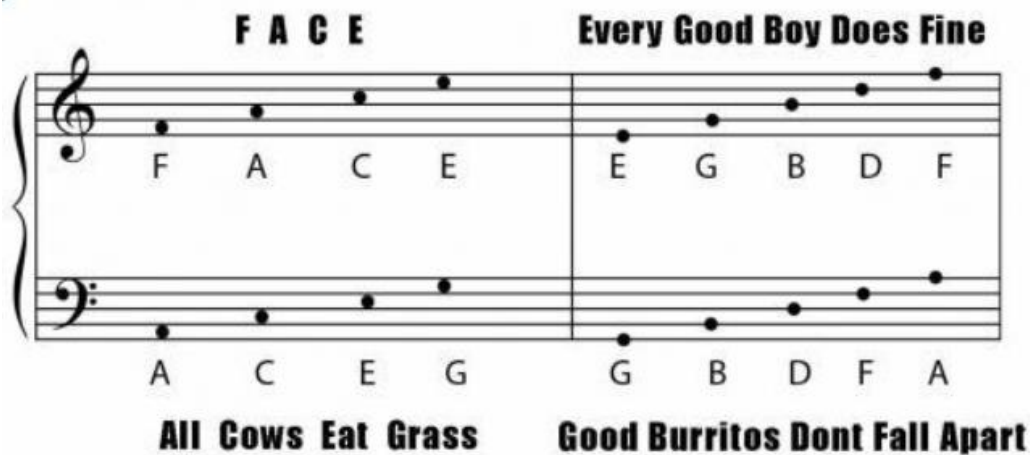
Note that the second “C” marks the beginning of a new octave with identical notes. The distance between two notes on the keyboard is counted in terms of steps: **half-steps** move to the closest note up or down (such as C to C#) and **whole-steps** move two successive notes (such as C to D). Each white key is assigned a letter of the alphabet from A to G. Black keys are assigned names based on the white keys with which they are adjacent. For example, the black key between C and D may be called either **C#** (pronounced C-sharp) or **Db** (pronounced D-flat). The sharp sign (#) signifies that the note is a half-step higher, while the flat sign (b) signifies that the note is a half-step lower.

Music is notated on a group of five lines called a **staff**. The staff acts like a map for finding the correct notes on the keyboard. Unlike most other instruments, the piano requires the use of two **staves** (called the **grand staff**), which are marked using the **treble clef** and the **bass clef**:



Treble Clef (top) and Bass Clef (bottom)

The treble clef governs the right half of the keyboard and, unless otherwise notated, is exclusively played by the right hand. Likewise, the bass clef governs the left half of the keyboard and is almost exclusively played by the left hand. The most efficient method of reading music is to memorize the position of each note on the staves. A helpful way to do this is to organize the notes by lines and spaces and create memorable acronyms:



Helpful Acronyms for Memorizing Space and Line Notes

While it is not necessary for parents to memorize these acronyms, I highly recommended that you review them with your child regularly until they can quickly recall the name of any note without having to refer to a cheat sheet. They can also come up with their own acronyms, as long as they use the same letter sequence. Once students have memorized these notes, they will have overcome one of the first major hurdles of mastering the piano!

Dynamics are another form of notation used to communicate how loud or quiet a portion of music should be played. There are three basic types of dynamics in music:

<p><i>p</i></p> <p>Piano Play Quietly</p>	<p><i>mf</i></p> <p>Mezzo Forte Play Slightly Loud</p>	<p><i>f</i></p> <p>Forte Play Loudly</p>
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Basic Dynamics in Music Notation

Typically, you will see dynamics notated either below the staves or between them. Students tend to play loudly automatically, so it may take more time for them to adjust to playing quietly. If your child needs help recognizing and playing with dynamics, it may help to have them practice the same song or exercise three times, each time playing slightly softer. You can also demonstrate what piano, mezzo forte, and forte sound like on the piano or associate them with whispering (piano), talking (mezzo forte), and yelling (forte).

Practicing Assignments

Learning the notes on the staff will greatly improve your child's ability to learn new music, though it will take some time for them to associate the notes they see on the page and the ones they play on the keyboard. When students first begin to learn a new song, they tend to want to play it by ear without paying much attention to the notes on the page. Later on, this can lead to frustration when songs become more intricate and demanding. The best way to avoid this frustration is to remind the student to look at the page and make sure they are playing correctly, using the right fingering, and playing at the right speed. It is always better to play slowly and correctly. Speed will come with time!

Early-beginner songs are generally notated with fingering rather than a music staff. The goal of these pieces is to develop the muscles in each finger so they can play independently of each other. An example of one of these pieces is shown here:

30 Old Pig-Donald
Black-Key Song with Whole Notes

R.H. 2
Old Pig - Don - ald had a song,
Played his key - board all day long,
f

L.H. 3 2 3
E - I - E - I - O! (2 - 3 - 4) :|| repeat!

Diagram: L.H. (3 2), R.H. (2 3 4)

The best way to help students practice these early songs is to remind them of the correct fingering (showing them on your own hands) and directing their hands to the right position on the keyboard if they get lost. You may also need to remind them that half notes and whole notes need to be held longer than quarter notes.

As the student advances and becomes more comfortable playing on the music staff, they will encounter songs and exercises that don't provide fingering suggestions or note names. Parents are encouraged to help the students write in the fingerings and the letter names of each note if the student gets lost. There is no perfectly "correct" fingering for any given song, so just try to write whatever fingering will make the song easier and more natural to play. You can also circle any fingerings that require the hand to jump or shift positions. Feel free to ask me if you need help with this! Here is one example:

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

C C G G A A G F F E E D D C

Fingerings: 1 1 (4) 4 5 5 4 (4) 4 3 3 2 2 1

Note Name and Fingering Example

Note that the "4" is circled at two different points to indicate that the finger has to stretch or reposition to play the notes. The notes names are added above the notes to help the student find their place on the keyboard.

The use of a metronome for counting is often helpful for students who struggle to understand rhythm. Many free metronome apps are out there, as well as physical metronomes that can be purchased online or in music stores. If a song specifies a particular tempo, simply set the metronome to the beats per minute given in the music.



Tempo Marking Example

Finally, I would like to leave you with a word of encouragement. Although keeping kids motivated to practice piano can be difficult, I can guarantee you that they will thank you in the future for helping them learn music. Having played piano for 18 years, I can't express how grateful I am to my parents for encouraging me to practice and improve my skills. Thank you for all the ways you are developing your child's love for music!