

The Hidden Benefits of Piano Playing

The number of adults who wish they knew how to play the piano is more than ten times the number who actually do play. Yet, too many parents don't encourage their children to take music lessons. Most parents aren't aware of how much more their child will get from piano lessons than just learning to play the piano. They don't realize that, although most children won't become professional musicians, every child will benefit in a variety of ways from time spent with the piano. Because they mistakenly believe that piano lessons will be enjoyable only to an exceptionally talented child, they deprive their children of an invaluable learning experience as well as the joy of making music.

Surveys support playing piano

Surveys by educators, government, and the music industry show that students develop social and academic strengths as their piano training progresses. These surveys find, too, that those who study music show more leadership skills, poise, vigor, and self-confidence than those who don't study music. Piano playing helps a child develop a good personality and attitude. It strengthens the bond between parent and child. It is also a creative outlet that allows a child to share his accomplishments with family and friends. Through the study of music, a child gains more self-esteem and more control over the intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects of life. These traits will remain with a child throughout his life, regardless of how long he plays the piano.

In a recent *Good Housekeeping* survey, 74 percent of the mothers surveyed would like to make music a part of their child's education, and 63 percent preferred the piano. This preference is not surprising since piano is the most popular musical instrument. Surveys by the American Music Conference show that 28 percent of U.S. households own a keyboard instrument and more than 18 million Americans play the piano. While instruments such as the ukelele, accordion, and guitar have risen and fallen in popularity, the piano has remained a favorite instrument with performers, composers, and amateur musicians for more than 200 years. Today the piano is the best choice for a child's music education.

Parents help children learn

Children learn through the help of their parents. The relationship that develops around music improves the bond between parent and child. Parents can act as guides, teachers, or fellow explorers by learning more about music themselves. This caring and sharing improves the sense of belonging, responsibility to one's self, and the ability to learn and to make decisions as the child imitates the parents' attitudes.

"Learning music helps physical, mental, emotional, and social growth," says Dr. Frank R. Wilson, a San Francisco neurologist. For several years Wilson has been studying the link between the brain and the ability to make music. He has discovered that the study of music is effective in developing the mind and body and that everyone has the physical and mental ability to play a musical instrument. He started on the neurological trail of music after noticing the physical and mental evolution taking place in his daughter after she began piano lessons. He even began taking lessons himself at age 40.

Music study benefits everyone

"My investigations point to a correlation between music study and muscular development, physical coordination, a sense of timing, mental concentration, the ability to hold up under stress, memory skills, and vocal, visual and aural development," says Dr. Wilson. "I believe that study can be started and enjoyed at an early age and that its value does not depend on the pursuit of a musical career."

"Humans are special physically because of the exceptional control we have over the muscles of our hands, mouth, and face and because of the bonding of these gifts to our powers of communication," continues Dr. Wilson. "Beyond the purely physical realm, we all have dreams, and a quality called spirit. Musicians have created a discipline in which these unique human traits can flourish without restraint. One can always reach deeper into the soul of an instrument, or the music written for it. We are not likely to ever lose our need or desire to communicate with one another through music."

Piano playing builds character

Dr. Wilson's studies offer strong evidence that piano playing helps a child acquire character traits which will be of value to him every day of his life. It builds discipline without the child's knowing it. And because music is a creative experience, it also stimulates a child's imagination and encourages self-expression. As he learns to play, the fun of doing it will give a child a sense of achievement. This pride of accomplishment builds self-confidence and poise.

Progress in music comes through curiosity and a series of small successes that reinforce, among other things, concentration, memory, mental alertness, and the ability to communicate, until one day the child proudly says, "I did it!"

Experience with piano music will also broaden a child's understanding of other subjects. While music is expressive, it is also ordered. Learning the structure and system of music makes arithmetic and abstract concepts such as science easier to grasp, the logic of grammar more comprehensive. And reading improves.

Players achieve more

The result of this is that, if you take background and academic aptitude into consideration, the musician will most likely achieve higher grades, more education, and a better job than the non-musician. Music lessons, even for a short time, have proven to contribute greatly to a child's physical and mental development. Since most parents worry about providing their children with the opportunities for happy, productive lives, the gift of music is a valuable one.

Today's piano teachers increasingly appreciate that children learn more than just music in playing the piano. During a child's early experience with music, they place more emphasis on creativity, enjoyment, and self-satisfaction and less on technique and performance. The ideal teacher will sustain a child's initial excitement about playing the piano and make the learning experience entertaining and stimulating. An added benefit is the attention and friendship from another influential adult that piano lessons give a child. It may be his first opportunity for personal tutoring and training by a professional instructor.

Music gives lifelong benefits

For most children, playing the piano becomes a form of recreation they will enjoy for a lifetime. Even the child who only takes lessons for two or three years and does not continue to play as an adult has achieved valuable skills. When a child shows more confidence in facing new experiences, an added willingness to stick with a job till it's finished, an increased poise in social situations, parents see some of the indirect—but very important benefits—of his piano lessons. As an adult he will have a fuller, more meaningful life because of his ability to communicate through music—either as a player or a listener. Music is a proven way to help a child excel—and the hidden benefits of piano playing are no longer a secret.