

## Tips to Choose the Right Instrument for your Child

by  
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Does your child resist practice? Before we dismiss them as lazy or unmusical, perhaps there are some legitimate reasons we can blame the instrument? Some students may simply be incompatible with the instrument chosen. Many abandoned instruments cultivate mould and dust under beds because they were just not suited to their owners.

### Size matters

Frustrations can be caused when instruments built for adult-sized hands are put into young children's small fingers. Consider these points:

- A youngster who lacks fine motor coordination may struggle with a violin but manage a saxophone more easily. But imagine the difficulties a small child would have with a baritone saxophone that is very nearly bigger than him. The young saxophonist is advised to begin with the alto instrument rather than that tenor or baritone which just happened to be available.
- A small trumpeter can start with a cornet, which, being conical, is compact.
- The weight and finger or arm stretch of tuba, trombone and bassoon are daunting and uncomfortable to smaller physiques.
- A young girl's clarinet may frequently squeak because her thin fingers can barely cover the holes. She would manage much better with the covered holes found on flutes and saxophones.

Playing an incompatible instrument can cause tension leading to fatigue, frustration and possibly repetitive strain injury. Tests are available through some music shops and schools to assess a student's suitability to the instrument of choice. Parents are strongly advised to discuss with teachers before reaching for their credit cards.

Many factors come into the equation – the varying rates of physical development, maturity, coordination and concentration. If a student really loves a particular instrument's sound, most incompatibilities can be overcome.



Many well-intentioned parents begin their children's music lessons before coordination and concentration skills are sufficiently mature. This may frustrate and cause negative impressions – "Oh, I'm not musical; I gave up the trombone in primary school". On the other hand, early musical education is to be encouraged. Scientific studies show that music training in the first decades of a child's life increases aural acuity and intelligence, as music uses both right and left hemispheres of the brain.

### Early starters

Singing, movement and clapping games are ideal from toddler stages. Various music education systems such as Kodaly, Dalcroze, Forte, Encore and Yamaha are invaluable precursors to playing an instrument as they develop aural, pitch, rhythmic and coordination skills.

Keyboard and stringed instruments are probably the only ones which benefit from a very young commencement age. The issues of size, finger stretch and weight for young violinists are solved by giving them smaller instruments appropriate to their age – eighth or even sixteenth size violins and celli are available. A three quarter-size guitar is available for young guitarists.

Don't overlook the human voice as a wonderful instrument; it is free, light and easily transported, unlike the double bass or tuba. It can be utilised from babyhood on, develops remarkably with use and provides invaluable development for other future instrumental studies. Repertoire is broad, catering to all tastes and styles.

### Physical points

Given that young people develop at varying rates, it is important to not take generalisations too seriously. However, the following points are a reasonable rule of thumb:

#### STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

Good coordination is required to do justice to the string family. Dr Shinichi Suzuki advocates starting stringed instruments as young as three or four; however, some teachers and parents prefer the benefit of a few years' maturity. Because the viola and double bass require wider hand stretching, it is wise to wait until they may be taken up as a second instrument. As cello and bass are supported on the ground, the weight issue is negligible.

#### WOODWIND INSTRUMENTS

Most children manage wood-wind instruments at approximately aged 10. It is wise to wait a few years, even until high school, before taking up instruments such as the bassoon, oboe, tuba or euphonium – but there are always exceptions of young players who cope splendidly.



NEVER MIND THAT IT WAS NEARLY BIGGER THAN HIM

## BRASS INSTRUMENTS

Lighter high brass instruments are usually managed without strain from about nine to 10 years of age. The trombone can be managed by Year 5 students if they are reasonably well built. Because of weight, it is advisable to begin with either the tenor trombone or the baritone (three-valve). The F trigger or bass instruments should not be considered until more advanced. Younger players may have difficulty reaching the sixth and seventh positions on the Bb tenor trombone.

With lower brass, younger players aged around 10 can begin with single horn or tuba as they are simpler and lighter than the double instruments. The tuba and all brass in general require solid physical development and more air than for many instruments.

### **Dental check**

All brass and woodwind instruments require well formed dental structure, and it is advisable to begin lessons only when the front adult teeth have stabilised. Playing with gaps caused by lost baby teeth can be tricky.

Orthodontic work also may cause discomfort at times but most wind and brass players manage to survive these torrid times. Teachers can suggest strategies to compensate.

The ideal match of musician to instrument may take some time to establish. Once compatibility is discovered, the sheer enjoyment of exploring and expressing its wide variety of musical timbres and styles surely creates healthy, disciplined and exceptional young people.

Adapted from *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* by Ruth Bonetti (Words and Music, 2002 and 2007; available at [www.ruthbonetti.com](http://www.ruthbonetti.com) or from good music stores. Art Credits: John Harrison)

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Ruth Bonetti writes a complimentary fortnightly E-Zine for teachers: *Music Educators' Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator* (nominal charge). Those interested to receive this can sign up at <http://ruthbonetti.com> or by emailing [ruth@ruthbonetti.com](mailto:ruth@ruthbonetti.com). Her books *Confident Music Performance; Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available at [www.RuthBonetti.com](http://www.RuthBonetti.com)

She compiled the method *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) and was Editorial Consultant for the AMEB Clarinet Grade Books. Ruth's music and speaking career, helping musicians and speakers to perform with confidence, has taken her around Australia, Europe (speaking German, French and Swedish) and the United States, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand.

### **EXCUSES, EXCUSES**

- *I can't take my bari sax home because I ride a bike*
- *My viola might give me repetitive strain injury*
- *My baby sister ate my only clarinet reed*
- *I can't tune the violin because the strings are rusty*

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