

Suzuki
Piano
Basics
Foundation News

To facilitate, promote, and educate the public on the way of teaching and playing the piano taught at the Talent Education Research Institute in Matsumoto, Japan by Dr. Haruko Kataoka

**Piano Basics
Foundation News**

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Next Deadline: August 1, 2009

Good Child, Bad Child

By Haruko Kataoka

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter
October 8, 1991

Reprinted in the Newsletter, Special Issue No. 4
September 22, 2007

Translated by Chisa Aoki and
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Edited by Karen Hagberg

When my elder child was young, he was always smiling and was considered to be "a great child." He always did what I asked him to do: "Don't touch that...don't walk around, just sit still..." On the train from Matsumoto to Shinjuku, when I said, "Let's sit here and look out the window," he would remove his shoes and sit in the same spot smiling till we arrived at our destination. People would compliment me, saying they had never met such a good child. Being a mother, I would feel so proud, arrogantly concluding that I had done a good job raising him.

For my convenience, he did not attend kindergarten, but for some reason when he started school, he was not able to do things as well as other children. He seemed to be more athletic than average, just like his grandfather who once held the record in Japan as an intermediate-distance runner. However,

during physical education class, my son seemed to have no motivation to run a race.

From the time he was two or three years old, he had stopped screaming. Being my child, he was no genius, but had good sense about daily routines. He was truly a child that anyone would consider praiseworthy.

During lunch at school, he dutifully obeyed his teacher whose rule was never to leave any food uneaten. So he forced himself to eat even though he never had a big appetite. Eventually he developed chronic indigestion.

When he could not overcome this condition, I took him to the late, Dr. Haruya Noguchi. Dr. Noguchi concluded that he had a weak spine, indicating that he was not aggressive. The doctor surmised he must not have been doing well in school. It was eye-opening for me.

It meant that when children are docile and listen to what adults tell them to do they often have a weak will and are also not strong physically. Now, looking back on it, it is strange to me that I conveniently assumed that he was a good child.

It really is better for children to be energetic and spirited enough to be mischievous. Eventually, they are able to study well. They talk back to you and rebel against you, cry and wail out loud. This is what a genuine really good child is all about!

Humans tend to think whatever is the most expedient is what qualifies as good. At the time, I was struck with the thought that we have to change how we think.

In contrast, my second child, a daughter, was aggressive and rebellious from birth. At the age of two, I scolded her for some kind of mischief and asked her to say "I'm sorry." She sat on the *tatami* floor bawling and screaming that she was sorry, but I could tell that she wasn't the least bit sincere. She was saying it out of spite. I could feel the intensity of her rebellion gushing

out of her entire body and found myself with an unaccustomed feeling of admiration for her.

A child who is physically robust can really scream out loud and stubbornly refuse to listen to you.

When you watch your child behave this way, please be heartened and celebrate in your heart how wonderfully strong and good your child is.

Having taught many years, I have observed that this strong-willed child is the child who performs best in concerts.

Parents and teachers, we must teach our children to direct the vibrant energy of **their** strong will so that they can put it to good use.

If this is accomplished, the result will always be positive. Of course, that energy can go astray toward a negative direction at times and can be troubling for us, but we have to be patient. Always strive to resolve problems positively and when things are peaceful between you and your children, praise them for being strong and for being able to stand up for themselves. Recognition from parents always gives a child confidence.

My son who lacked that strong-will, being a late bloomer, nevertheless made up for lost time. Toward his later elementary-school years, he became a member of the school relay team. Nowadays, when he is passionate about something and I happen to bring up his childhood, he rebuts with such vigor (the very aptitude that I had hoped for him to develop) that I end up backing off. To nurture. It takes time to nurture. It cannot be rushed and it is very important and crucial to wait patiently. The more energetic and aggressive the child is, the less controllable he is. It is not the easy, seemingly 'good' child, but the child who is totally difficult and bothersome who is really the good child. Even if a child is weak-willed at first, if you wait patiently, there will come a time when he will become strong.

As adults, it is a matter of great importance to research how to nurture the tough, strong-willed child who doesn't listen to you.

Piano Basics Teaching

by Linda Nakagawa

It is hard to believe that it has been over 20 years since my first observation of Dr. Kataoka's Suzuki piano teachings. As I think back on the thousands of lessons I observed, so many memories come to mind.

She used to tell us not to take notes. She would tell us to just absorb the lessons, for human beings write things down to forget them. I would still write a few things down, and read them every day during the time I was observing her teach. They seemed important at the time, but when I returned home I would forget about them. Hopefully, I unconsciously tucked them away in a part of my brain to be used later. It is true that we learn by observation.

Actually, I understand now why she did not want us to take notes. The truth is that if one is busy writing things down, it is more difficult to listen to the sound, to the music. I do believe that the many lessons I observed has paid off because even after her passing in 2004, her teaching comes alive while I am teaching. I know that I am still learning from her.

It's difficult to say which encounter with Dr. Kataoka had the most impact on my life. There were so many. After my very first one-week workshop and lesson, I returned home excited about trying some new ideas. After one week of teaching my students, however, I was in shock. Somehow they acquired the weakest part of my piano playing. As an adult, we get to know our strengths and weaknesses. It is human nature to want our children to live a better life. Somehow, my students were acquiring my weaknesses. Why? How? What could I do? I knew that I had to become a better model for my students. I knew that they would not improve unless I improved. I believed that no matter how much knowledge I acquired and passed on verbally to my students, they would do just as I did. I decided I would observe Dr. Kataoka and have lessons with her as much as I could. I had only one goal: to become a better teacher for my students.

I determined that the only way to do this would be to develop my own ability to play the piano better. I embraced that theory because I wanted to be able to play more effortlessly and at the same time to produce a better sound. I remember Dr. Kataoka saying to us that we must be patient because it takes 10 years to develop an ability. My heart sank. But then she said that once a single ability is developed the next one will not take as long. It has been over 20 years and I can honestly say that my ability to make a better tone on the piano has improved. If I can improve, anyone can.

Dr. Suzuki always said, "Tone has a living soul." I believe this and I also believe that it can only be taught through ability training. This is what I am learning from Dr. Kataoka.

I am most grateful to her for diligently, patiently and passionately nurturing the Matsumoto teachers and anyone interested. And I am grateful to the Matsumoto teachers for continuing to travel to the States to share the experience and knowledge they gained from her.

I will remain humble teaching Suzuki method because we must judge our ability as teachers from our weakest students. The responsibility falls clearly on the teacher. All students are unique and every family situation is different. As Suzuki Piano Basics teachers, even though we teach the same things, *how* we work with each individual student is unique. Students come each week, and during those

precious lessons accumulated over time an ability is being developed. I am not talking about rushing through the pieces. We all know that moving from one piece to the next is not progress. I believe that if we can teach students to focus, concentrate, and work hard with patience and joy, these are abilities that will remain with them throughout their lives.

Let's not teach with our mouths. We must develop our own abilities. Let's demonstrate through our improving tone. Let's work hard for the sake of the children for they are our mirror image.

I believe that if we can teach students to focus, concentrate, and work hard with patience and joy, these are abilities that will remain with them throughout their lives.

**Dr. Suzuki always said,
"Tone has a living soul."**

Structuring a Pre-School Suzuki Piano Class: Solutions in My Studio, Part II

By Karen Hagberg

There is nothing about my piano studio that would make a visitor think it is a space for children. It is not equipped with small chairs or with children's books or toys. It is simply a piano studio with two pianos, and 20 regular folding chairs, decorated to my own taste with some paintings and photographs. It has been my experience that children generally behave better in adult surroundings. Since I expect very young children to learn to be quiet, to respect class dynamics, and to follow directions, it is best that the space not encourage other activity or provide distractions. Chairs for the children and their parents are set in a semi-circle, facing the pianos.

All the students have been listening to the recording of Book 1, and the parents have begun writing the solfège syllables above the notes in their score. Aside from the recording and the score of Book 1, I do not require that class members have any other equipment at home at this point. I don't even require a piano. Also, I use only the equipment that is already in my studio: the two pianos and the adjustable seating. I have not found it necessary to use additional materials that may be considered interesting to pre-schoolers (colorful pictures, stuffed animals, rhythm instruments, games, etc.).

I limit each class to eight students. It can be very lively on rare days when all eight show up.

Based on the principle that children thrive and learn with repetition, the structure of the class is the same every week. We begin by singing the melodies of the Book 1 pieces in solfège. As much as possible, children are asked to participate depending on the skills they already have developed. It is a really good idea to have children with a range of abilities. I've been able to accomplish this by requiring students to continue attending the class after they have begun private lessons. Ideally, there will be some students who can play most of the right hand melodies in Book 1 along with others who have just joined the group. In this way, new people have the opportunity to see what Book 1 students can typically do, and these more experienced students (and their parents) can appreciate what they have already learned and want to share it with

newcomers. This dynamic is integral to the Suzuki Method.

I ask for suggestions about which piece to sing first, and those children who have begun to learn the names of the pieces raise their hands with suggestions. When we decide on the first piece to be sung, I ask which note begins that piece, and the children who have learned this will answer. We always begin singing by checking the pitch on the piano, so if there is a student in the class who has learned how to find the notes on the piano I ask him/her to go to the piano to play that pitch for us before we sing. Sometimes I will ask a student who knows how to find the notes to take another child to the piano, point to the correct key, and then let the other child play the pitch for us. When there is a student in the room who can play the piece, either RH or hands together, I ask that student to go to the piano to accompany the singing.

After hearing the correct pitch, we all begin singing when I say "Go." I ask students to get ready and to wait for "Go" for everything we do so that they know about doing this before they ever go to the piano. Parents and students both sing, and parents notate their scores with the solfège syllables as we go along. More experienced parents help the newer parents do this by checking over what they have written in.

We continue singing Book 1 pieces in this way for the first 15-20 minutes of the 45-minute class. The long-term members of my classes are able to sing all of the pieces in the book, and a couple of the students are able to play along with all of them. New parents and students who observe the class are immediately drawn into this process. If they purchase the recording on their first visit, the child is already singing along with the rest of the class when he/she comes for the second time. Parents, who take a bit longer to pick up the skill of singing solfège, are always amazed by this ability of their own little children. Two-year-olds can sing right along with older students. I too must admit that it is quite amazing.

In addition to listening to the recording, I ask that parent and child sing together as we do in class for

at least five minutes every day at home. When a parent has difficulty matching pitches, I suggest that the singing be done with the recording.

Throughout the class session, I often take time to talk with the parents about various aspects of the Suzuki Method. The comments are brief so that the flow of the class is not interrupted and so the children do not have time to lose focus. I don't plan these comments ahead of time; they flow naturally from something that happens in the course of the class. I consider the purpose of the class to be as much parent orientation as it is preparation for the student to begin private lessons.

After we sing we practice the group bow. I ask the children to line up and to walk out to a spot in front of the chairs where their parents are sitting to get ready to bow. They learn to stay in line, to space themselves evenly while walking, to walk naturally with their hands relaxed at their sides not touching their clothes, to then stand facing the audience with a pleasant facial expression, to wait after applause begins for a piano chord, and to begin their bow on the chord. Then they learn to bow for the duration of the chord, leaning over just enough to see their toes with hands remaining at their sides. After the chord ends they learn to return to the ready position, to stand still, and to look back at the audience without changing the position of the hands and without fidgeting with clothes or touching the body. There are many details in the process of bowing that must be practiced several hundred times before a student is able to bow well on a stage. Since bow practice may be done at home without a piano, I assign it every week.

At the conclusion of the group bow, children are asked to volunteer to come to the piano. There is usually time for about three or four of them for about five minutes each. When a child comes to the piano, we bow together as we would for any regular lesson. The child must bow well and on cue before I will let them sit at the piano. When a child is too shy to bow well, or will not follow directions, I ask him/her to sit down, taking care not to be negative, but simply to state that he/she is not ready today to go to the piano. After a successful bow, I take time seating the student, often explaining what I'm doing to the parents. After seeing various children being seated in this way, parents can really appreciate the importance of the equipment and have no qualms about purchasing it, sometimes even before they begin individual lessons. I tell them not to practice unless they have 1) a real piano (not an electronic piano) and 2) footrests and an adjustable chair.

When properly seated with good posture, the student is asked to get ready with the thumb on the first note of *Twinkle*. Beginners are placed on *do* and more experienced students find the first note on their own. Then I ask them how long they can stay in ready position today. They know I want them to do it for at least a count of five. Some students want to count much higher, to one hundred or higher. Checking to see that their body, arm, wrist, and hand are relaxed and that they are touching, not depressing, the key we all begin to count when I say ♪do+ while the student holds the ready position calmly, not moving. If the count is not too high, we go to other fingers and do the same thing. Some students want us to count to different numbers for each finger. If the student moves, we stop counting.

If the student is able, we will do some *Twinkle* ready-go practice after the ready-position practice in either RH or LH. The more experienced students are demonstrating good *Twinkles* from beginning to end. The beginners may do just one or two fingers in a *Twinkle* rhythm before I end the lesson. In order to engage the entire class for this *Twinkle* practice, I ask the others to clap the rhythm when I say ♪do+. In this way they all learn the rhythms very well before they try to play them on the piano, and they all learn to begin on the cue of ♪do+. At the end of the lesson I ask students to name their finger numbers in a loud, clear voice. This is a prelude to making a clear sound on the piano. After doing finger numbers we bow together again, and the lesson is over.

After several students come to the piano in this way, and if there is still time, all the students stand in front of my two pianos and I quiz them on finding *do*. If a student cannot yet find it, I show them where it is. After finding and playing several different *do*'s on the pianos, the students get ready to play a single *do* when I say ♪do+. Then they hold the note, without moving, until all the sound disappears. They do this on various pitches.

The students also play back simple patterns that I sing, such as *Re Do* or *Do Re Mi*. Occasionally I will reverse this process by playing a pattern on the piano and asking parents and students together to sing back, in solfège, what I have just played. Both parents and students are getting better at this as time goes on.

I end the class by setting out a basket of stickers. Each child chooses one.

To add or change items on the Suzuki Piano Basics website, contact
Karen Hagberg (kh@hagbergsuzuki.com, 585-244-0490).

Suzuki Piano Basics Web Site and discussion group:

<http://core.ecu.edu/hist/wilburnk/SuzukiPianoBasics>

Job Opening:

Suzuki Piano Basics teachers are particularly encouraged to apply for an opening at the Victoria Conservatory of Music in Victoria, British Columbia, beginning September 1, 2009. For details contact Dr. Jamie Syer, Head Keyboard