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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***

Editor

Karen Hagberg

Layout

Teri Paradero

Translators

Chisa Aoki
Teri Paradero

Production and Distribution

Linda Nakagawa

Send Articles to:

Piano Basics Foundation

khagberg1943@gmail.com
585-978-0600

Memberships / Subscriptions

Linda Nakagawa
242 River Acres Drive
Sacramento, CA 95831
916-422-2952
nakagawalinda@gmail.com

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*Amazing Power
When We
Decide to Take
Action*

By Haruko Kataoka

From the Matsumoto Suzuki Piano Newsletter

Vol.12 No.9, February 1, 2003

Translated by Chisa Aoki and
Teri Paradero

Edited by Karen Hagberg

It is very difficult to educate a human being from birth. In other words, how an individual grows up depends on whatever you do, but still it is fun to anticipate the future. As human beings each of us is born with our own distinctive personality, and whether we develop in a

positive or negative direction depends on our environment.

The stage of life when children are obedient and listen to their parents is from birth to, roughly, middle school age. I can almost hear some of you disagreeing, "Not a chance! My child is in second grade and already doesn't listen to what I say." Nevertheless, at this stage, even though they may disagree or resist, as long as a parent is firm children eventually listen to their parents.

This is the stage in which all the basics of human life must be completely learned. Examples of things that must be taught diligently range from spoken civilities: "Thank you," "Please," "Hello," "Goodbye," etc. to the ability to demonstrate goodwill towards others (generosity), to be considerate of others, to offer mutual help and support, to be patient and tolerant, to strive and put forth effort, to carry oneself with proper posture, to use proper speech etiquette and manners. This is the stage when children have the ability to listen to you. So if parents single-mindedly focus with patience, children will learn and be able to utilize their life abilities for the rest of their lives.

When human beings reach the age of twelve or thirteen, they start maturing physically into adulthood. They are not the former children who had previously been totally dependent on their parents. What this means is that they have

arrived at the 'starting line' of life where they will begin to assert their independence as adults. Not only are they developing physically, they are simultaneously developing mentally and psychologically into adults. This is the emergence of their striving to become totally independent and to take responsibility for their own behavior. They are no longer able just to listen to what adults are telling them. When parents unwittingly repeat themselves as they had done in the past, children of this age are bound to tell their parents that they are annoying.

This becomes painfully apparent during piano practice. While still in grade school, children would complain and be unwilling to practice. However, when they are middle school (exactly when this happens is a bit variable, some children get there sooner than others), they have an aversion to anything parents ask them to do. They are purposefully obstinate and averse to any kind of interference. Mothers lament, "It's impossible, he refuses to listen now." However, when mothers tell me this I always say they should go home and cook a celebratory meal because their hard work up to this point to bring up their child properly is the very reason why his body and mind have grown so splendidly. Strong resistance is proof that she is striving to become independent.

So, when this happens, how do you continue to educate your children?

In my experience, if you want to direct their education toward positive things, it won't happen by giving them orders. It is necessary to build an environment where self-motivation and internal drive can be developed.

Here is a simple example in the area of piano study: when older children are self-motivated to participate in a concert and not ordered to perform, three or four days prior to the event they will exert themselves with concerted effort without being coerced into practicing. At the concert, together with their nervousness and their sheer effort, they will relish their achievement. Let's provide them with these kinds of opportunities.

In my personal experience, when my two children were getting ready to take their high school exam, being prone to thinking differently than most parents I suggested that they didn't have to go to high school. However, they wanted to go to high school with their friends so they began studying on their own accord. I didn't even once say anything about studying. I found out that, within a very short time, they had gotten higher scores than they had ever gotten in their entire three years in middle school. I realized that when human beings are self-motivated and earnestly focus, they can demonstrate up to five to ten times more power with extraordinary results that are so different from normal day-

to-day events. It is possible to regain three years of study even in a limited timeframe. My children proved to me what we are all capable of doing.

When adults study piano, and a teacher points out a bad habit, and we try to fix it in a lackadaisical way, all the time wondering to ourselves if we really play that way, it is very difficult to implement the change necessary to acquire good technique. First of all, we must realize that there is a problem and then it is necessary to have the determination to change it with concentration and perseverance. What can conceivably take three years can be corrected in one year.

Human beings must decide for ourselves what it is we want to accomplish. We can merely observe what other people are doing and become confused, wondering what we are doing and having no particular direction, but do we have the time and energy to waste complaining like this? We may as well tell ourselves we can do it! When we finally decide, and become committed to concentrate and to carry out what we have to do, then we can achieve our goals with unimaginable power and strength. Human beings are wonderful! I am so moved by how wonderful human beings are.

This year let us all, adults and children alike, decide to do everything with the kind of effort that produces great results.

From the Editor:

Due to a dearth of our normal summer workshops and festivals, you will notice that this issue is a combined one: July/August and September/October.

A new school year is upon us, and we wish we could say that our lives are back to normal, but we unfortunately cannot. We all are suffering from pandemic fatigue. We have been unable to schedule the in-person workshops we rely on to deepen our understanding of Suzuki Piano Basics and to boost our morale. There are still no upcoming events involving Japanese teachers, as the pandemic has shut down the country to foreign travel. We have received no announcements of domestic events. If you have an event you would like broadcast to the membership, please alert me and I will send out an announcement about it by email between newsletters.

On a brighter note, we have heard from members who have reported incredibly creative ways they have overcome Covid restrictions through our Covid Snapshots column. There are no submissions for this column in this issue, but I still invite reports, photos, articles for our next issue.

This issue includes a second pertinent article from Buffalo NY-area teacher Laura Kauppi, one of our younger members who is a wonderful writer. There are others of you

out there who write for the parents in your studio. We welcome your submissions to share with colleagues. In these times, it is sharing like this in addition to Kataoka Sensei's wisdom, that will keep us all inspired to do our best for each and every student. Please make sure to enroll your families as Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation members* so you may share this newsletter with them. Parents need inspiration too.

Best wishes to all for this New Year!

Karen Hagberg, Editor

*To enroll your families, collect the annual \$25 fee for family membership from each of them. Prepare a list of their names to be included in the Directory and send your list along with the total collected in a single check made out to Suzuki Piano Basics Foundation to our treasurer Linda Nakagawa, 242 River Acres Drive, Sacramento CA 95831. We appreciate receiving your family membership list along with your own membership renewal. Membership is for the calendar year, but families who join now may receive the newsletter. Individual teachers are responsible for distributing the newsletter by email to their enrolled families.

“They just lost interest”

From Lift School of Music Newsletter, Vol.12, no.8, July, 2021

“They just lost interest,” I hear it all the time. Sometimes it’s hard to see a complete picture of what is really happening when you are in the midst of it, but children almost never just lose interest in something (I’ve seen it happen once in my whole time of teaching, and she ended up re-interested within a year).

When you’re in the thick of it, it seems sudden, as if your child just woke up one day no longer interested in piano. For me, watching from afar, it’s often a slow-motion slide into disinterest.

Adults, along with their children, go through an excitement phase when their child first starts lessons that gradually gives way to a resistance phase, and slowly becomes and “old shoe” routine.

When you (as the parent) are in the resistance phase, it’s hard to see clearly and easy to displace your own feelings onto your child (because, let’s face it, if you’re feeling resistance it would be easier to just have your child quit).

It’s important to be honest with yourself and try to notice if you are displacing feelings, but it’s easier when you know what to watch for. Children are very sensitive to changes, especially the following:

1. A parent suddenly stopping watching their lessons. Did a spouse used to watch lesson with you and now doesn’t? Did you stop watching lessons?
2. A parent suddenly not taking notes during lessons and playing on their phone instead. Did you previously focus hard on lessons and now you are working during the lesson?

3. A parent suddenly paying attention to siblings during lesson (sometimes, such as with a new baby, it’s unavoidable but it’s still something that can be addressed).

4. Changes in practicing schedule and supervision. Is your child suddenly practicing alone? Are you trying to cram practice into a short time slot and not playing practice games with your child?

5. Changes in recital protocol. The pandemic made recitals different. Does your child still feel special and important on recital day?

It’s also important to be aware of cause-and-effect in these situations. It can feel as if the child’s lack of interest causes the parents disinterest, but the vast majority of time it is actually the other way around.

Okay, so I’ve lost interest, what do I do?

If you read this list and realize you may have made some of these changes without even realizing it, you can figure out how to fix them. However, if your child is no longer engaged, you might have to work harder to re-engage your child.

First, figure out what caused your disinterest. Are you stressed from work? Family? Summer childcare issues? Even if there is nothing you can do about your stress, understanding where it is coming from can help you.

Next, sit down with your child and apologize for the changes. Make a plan on how to make your child feel special again.

Last, figure out some extra activities you can do with your child to help them re-engage. Dance party with piano music playing? Outdoor live music? Have a huge party after their recital in July? Make a plan on how to get your child excited again.

There are times when the parent is doing all the right things and the child loses interest. Especially now during Covid students are under crushing stress, but stress could also come from being bullied, having a difficult friendship, or from some upsetting experience that the

parent does not know about. At times like these, it is not surprising that a child will lose interest even in things that they love. If you suspect that outside stress is at the bottom of loss of interest, having understanding conversations may get to the bottom of the problem, and simply talking about it can help. Patience is the key. Continue to provide positive musical experiences and play beautiful music in your home. Don't worry if it takes some time to get your child re-engaged. After all, (though you might not be able to see it), it took your child some time to get disengaged. Just keep trying, and they will come around!

A Question of Minimal Standards

By Karen Hagberg

From Matsumoto News, Vol.2, no.9, April 1990

As teachers, we Americans think we have high standards, and we usually see these manifested in the ability of our best students. We take pride in our successes, and we tend to put all our energies into our most "promising" students.

The other side of the coin is that we operate on the assumption that a certain rather high percentage of students simply will not be able to learn whatever it is we are teaching. We have come to think this is so inevitable—the very nature of things—that we stop trying to teach this group at the other end of the spectrum with very little remorse. We have actually come to believe that we have no

responsibility toward them at all. They are simply, by definition, the "uneducable" population in our classes. *All* teachers have them, we reason, not just ourselves. And nobody else seems able to teach them either.

In the United States, the most glaring case in point is our illiteracy rate, which, according to most studies, is around 20% (although if we go to estimates of "functional illiteracy" some studies conclude that over 50% of our adult population qualifies for this category). Despite compulsory public education, one in five adult Americans cannot read or

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write, and over half cannot read or write to the level that helps them fully function in society. They have fallen through the cracks of our education system. Teachers gave up on them. Nobody take

...nothing can account for the great disparity except the difference in the ability of our respective countries to educate our children.

responsibility.

In sharp contrast is the illiteracy rate in Japan, which at this point is just around 1%. This difference is all the more startling when we consider the relative difficulties of written English and Japanese. In English, we have a single, 26-letter phonetic alphabet. Although English is notoriously difficult to spell correctly, it is not impossible to derive a pronunciation from a written word or to approximate the spelling of a spoken word enough to look it up in a dictionary.

Written Japanese, on the other hand, requires knowledge of two 44-character phonetic systems (alphabets) and, in addition, around 2,000 Chinese characters (Kanji) for basic literacy. In addition, the Kanji do not express a pronunciation and, depending on their context, have two or more entirely different pronunciations, or “readings” that must be memorized. The only way to look up an unknown Kanji is to count the number of brush strokes it takes to write it, which may be as many as 18 among the commonly used ones, and to consult a list of all the characters which require the same number of strokes. In comparison with most other languages in the world, written Japanese is hopelessly

complicated, a fact which makes the low illiteracy rate (one of the lowest in the world) even more astounding, while making ours seem, by comparison, downright inexplicable and completely unacceptable.

In an attempt to explain away the difference, writers have cited various American social challenges, and some have even suggested that the Japanese people are somehow inherently more intelligent than people in the rest of the world. But it is fairly obvious to any foreigner living in Japan that people are people, we all face social problems, and differences in intelligence are negligible. No, nothing can account for the great disparity except the difference in the ability of our respective countries to educate our children. Lately, most people, even our educators, agree that American education is failing too great a percentage of our population.

I do not mean to glorify the Japanese system, as there are many things about it that Americans would not wish to emulate, but it seems fundamental that a public education system would at least teach its children to read and write, for if a student cannot do these things they cannot learn much else. How does the Japanese system do this? By my observation it is because education there focuses on a set of minimum standards for *all* students, rather than on high standards applied to a selected few.

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In elementary school, for example, students are not yet separated according to ability, nor is there the phenomenon of failing a grade and having to repeat it. There are minimum standards set for each grade level, and it is the teacher's responsibility that, by the end of each year, all students in the class will meet these standards. This is a challenge that most American teachers, having come to believe it is impossible, do not take up. When I first heard Kataoka Sensei say that we had to judge our teaching by our worst students, it was a concept completely foreign, both to me and to the few hundred American teachers with me in the audience, all of whom had failed to consider the possibility of establishing minimum standards for all our students.

...we had to judge our teaching by our worst students... to consider the possibility of establishing minimum standards for all our students.

It does not take a lot of energy to teach the students who are confident and self-motivated, who get lots of help at home, who are quick to grasp new ideas and seem thirsty for them. It does not take piano teachers much energy to teach children whose parents, on their own, realize the importance of providing a fine instrument, of surrounding children with good music, of carefully observing lessons, and following up by supervising practice. How can we even take credit for the accomplishments of such students? We have so much more to teach the children of parents who understand none of these things but have come to us to learn. It is too easy to give up on these "hopeless" cases before we even begin.

On the first day of elementary school, teachers can easily see which students will be easy to teach. When roll is called, some children will clearly, confidently, and enthusiastically announce their presence, while others will be frightened or embarrassed and barely respond above a murmur. At that moment, a teacher makes important distinctions and, even more important,

Confidence can be taught; enthusiasm can be taught... Japanese educators have, in other words, identified a skill basic to all other education and have devised ways of teaching it to all their students.

decisions. Teaching may be directed at one group or the other. The basic skills required of all students before effective learning can take place can be taken at face value—some students have them, others do not—or they can be taught to the students who do not. Confidence can be taught; enthusiasm can be taught. Lack of these things in a young child need not be seen as a burden destined to be shouldered throughout a student's life.

In his book **Japan as No.1** (Charles E. Tuttle, co., Tokyo, 1979), Ezra Vogel describes various goals set by the Japanese Ministry of Education for second-grade students. These include, "...to speak to all of the audience with a clear voice..." This is achieved first by teaching them to answer the roll call in a loud, firm voice while standing, not being allowed to shrink down into their seats and mumble inaudibly. The ability to answer confidently is considered basic to learning anything else. Once a student can do this, they will be called upon to answer simple questions in the same way. When this is achieved, the answers to more difficult questions will be required. Japanese educators have, in other words, identified a skill basic to all other education and have devised ways of teaching it to all their students.

Kataoka Sensei teaches us to teach the Basics of playing the piano. Some American teachers may wonder why a student first needs to learn to bow. Bowing may seem like a peculiar Japanese affectation. But it is the equivalent of answering "present" in a clear voice. It requires self-confidence, body balance, a willingness to cooperate with the teacher—all things that must be present before any other learning can take place. When I first observed Kataoka Sensei's beginning lessons with very young children I wondered how American parents would react if I were to spend

only a few minutes asking the child to bow with all elements in place—standing up straight, feet together, eye contact with teacher, good body balance, slow bow from the waist followed by more eye contact—with inability or refusal followed by dismissal. A daily assignment for bow practice is then given to the parent with explanation about why the bow is essential. What if such lessons continued for several weeks? Lots of parent education is required during this period. After the bow is finally accomplished, and before actually playing the first Twinkle, there are lessons on sitting with good posture, holding a still, focused ready position with concentration for a count of ten, and produnga single musical tone with relaxation and natural movement. Without these things, nothing else can be learned well.

All students can be educated with a step-by-step grasp of Basic skills. The students who do not naturally display any

of these skills in the beginning can be our biggest challenges, not our discards, and finally our greatest accomplishment.



Matsumoto News Republication:

From September 1988 through January 1992, Karen Hagberg lived and studied in Matsumoto with Dr. Haruko Kataoka, the co-Founder of the Suzuki Piano Method and the founder of the Suzuki Piano Basics Method. During that time she published a newsletter with nine issues annually that was distributed to Suzuki piano teachers in North America and Europe. In addition to news of upcoming workshops and multi-piano concerts, each issue contained an article intended to share what it was like as a foreigner to live in Japan and to study with Dr. Kataoka and Dr. Suzuki.

Over thirty years have elapsed since the first issue of Matsumoto News: an entire generation. By popular demand we are re-publishing the articles here. They have been edited from the original, but they remain under copyright and may not be reproduced without written permission from the author.

“WHETHER YOU THINK YOU CAN OR THINK YOU
CAN’T,
YOU ARE RIGHT.”

HENRY FORD