

One word of warning: If you do not enjoy working with children, *do not take any as students*. The “damage” that can be done to a child with impatience, poor pedagogical practices, *etc.*, can totally destroy a child’s innate love of music—not to mention the damage to your own teaching reputation.

On the other hand, children can be a *tremendous* thrill to teach! Every small bit of progress is a major leap for them. They are fascinated and excited with every aspect of the instrument, and often form strong emotional ties with the teacher.

Working with children can also help considerably if you start feeling “teacher burn-out.” The excitement, blatant honesty and utter joy that a child experiences through music is contagious and I know several teachers who—after years of teaching in conservatories and universities—simply quit in order to work exclusively with children.

Teaching music—and especially guitar—to children is rapidly becoming one of the most open and profitable fields in the business. A number of conservatories in Europe have even founded degree programs that are designed specifically for teachers of children.

In short, there is a great need for guitar teachers who enjoy working with children, but if you *don’t* enjoy working with children, *don’t do it*.

Technical Aspects

Obviously the size of a child is an important consideration. There are numerous companies who build three-fourths, half and even quarter-sized guitars. Stress to the parents the importance of the correct size of instrument for the student.

Unfortunately, sometimes the parents will have already bought a guitar or have one that has been in the family. If they insist on using a larger guitar, have the student use a capo on the second or even fourth fret.²

A capo doesn’t solve the problems of sitting and string spacing that may be too wide for smaller hands. There’s simply no solution to

2. These frets are usually best because many guitars have markers or “dots” (at the frets 3, 5, 7, *etc.*) and placing the capo on II or IV will keep the dots in the same respective position.

these problems aside from buying another guitar. However, a capo will help with the left hand placement and position if a larger guitar is used.

Some guitar teachers, at the beginning of each semester, use the first lesson to meet with new students and parents at a music store to either help pick out the new guitar, or to at least show parents what to look for when they go shopping for an instrument. This can solve a host of problems at the beginning and help form a stronger bond between you and the parents.

If you are fortunate enough to assist in choosing the guitar, a general rule is, when the guitar is stood on the floor next to the student, the head of the guitar should be roughly as high as the child's waist or a little higher. Obviously the action of the instrument should be set so it plays easily. Medium or high gauge strings are best. Stress to the parents that a footstool and small chair (without arms) is *absolutely* necessary for practicing at home.³

"Classical" Guitar

Often parents—and children—will expect lessons in chords, and more popular styles of playing from the beginning. Stress that regardless of the style, the technique of playing is the same for *all* styles, and that the easiest and fastest way to develop a solid technique is by studying classical guitar.

In these cases, after the student has learned all the diatonic notes in the first position, the teacher may opt to continue with classical or change to folk style for chords, *etc.* In any case, after the second year or so (when the hand positions have totally stabilized), the student should be introduced to chords. This is important, not only for them to have fun playing songs, *etc.*, but it will also help develop the student's understanding of music theory.

Several teachers I know have arrangements with rock guitar teachers, and trade students back-and-forth. This can give you access to many students who would not normally study classical, but who do recognize the need for the technical precision that classical promotes.

3. A majority of teachers I know who take younger students have found that a higher string gauge is preferable with small guitars.

In spite of what one might think, if the action of the instrument is set fairly low, most smaller guitars (half-sized, or quarter-sized) tend to be play easier and sound better if they are strung with high gauge strings. If a smaller guitar is strung with light-gauge strings, the student will have a tendency to "pull" the strings because the strings are so loose. This naturally results in a poor right hand movement.

I would *strongly* suggest trying any of the following strings on the smaller guitars of your younger students: *LaBella, 2001, High Tension* or *LaBella, 2001, Extra High Tension* or *Savarez Yellow Label*.

This can also give you a good outlet for students who later want to study other styles that you may not want to teach.

Parents

Keep in mind that you must often gently educate the parents as well as the child! Because guitar is so popular, parents with some minimal background in guitar (which nowadays is virtually everyone) may have already decided what and how the child should learn to play. Deal with this tactfully! Remember, while their ideas may be totally off-base, parents are allies since they are the ones who make sure the child practices.

After a short time it's not uncommon for brothers and sisters—and even the parents—to become so interested in the guitar that they begin taking lessons as well.

Once a month invite parents to sit in on the lessons, ask questions, *etc.* This can help understanding tremendously, plus, for very young students it will give them a chance to “show off” in a slightly formal setting—similar to older students playing in studio class. This type of involvement is critical, and insures greater progress.

Recitals

All students should perform. Once or twice a year you should have a studio recital for all your students, and this includes the children. Beyond the obvious advantages of having a deadline to work toward, the chance to let the parents see progress, *etc.* Recitals also give the students a chance to meet each other, which can be a tremendous motivation.

The most important thing is to make sure the child plays a piece that is easy enough that there is virtually no chance of error. This can mean playing a one-line melody that lasts five seconds, but that's o.k. It is still performing, and the experience *must* be positive.

In preparing for a studio recital, have the student go through the entire “performance” every week for at least one month prior to the performance date. This includes practicing the entrance, bows, *etc.* It's not a bad idea to have him do it first thing when he comes in for a lesson. Granted the hands won't be warmed up, but that is precisely why this is good—it will familiarize him with the feeling of playing “cold”—a feeling that is very similar to what happens on stage when one is slightly nervous.

I've also found it enjoyable to have all the students write their own program notes. I've had several so young that they couldn't read, which meant reading them biographical information and letting them paraphrase it in their own words, but let *them* actually do it.

This accustoms the student (even the youngest) to doing "research," and at the very least makes for some outrageous program notes! For example, below are some program notes written by very young children from one of my studio recitals several years ago.

- *Torneo* by Gaspar Sanz. Sanz was from Spain. He played guitar and got real good and wrote a lot of stuff.

- *Au Claire de la Lune*. anon. This is a folk song from France. It's really pretty. It means in the moon light. We don't know who wrote it so you have to say that it's anonymous. That means we don't know who wrote it.

- *Minuett* by S. L. Weiss This is a really cool piece. It was a dance that people did when George Washington was alive. But he's dead. So is Weiss.

Special Suggestions for Children

- 1) Help the child design his own practice schedule. While the schedule should be "arranged" by the teacher, if the child helps design the schedule rather than simply being told, "do this..." he will almost always practice more.

In helping young students design their own practice schedule, I often suggest that they practice 30 minutes total per day, in two, 15 minute segments. At the end of each 15 minute segment, they are "assigned" to go have a cookie or some other "prize."

- 2) Have the child practice with a timer, such as a standard kitchen timer, but make sure that the timer is kept in another room, since the "ticking" can be a distraction. It can be a good idea to have them also set the timer to signal the end of the break (usually 5 minutes is enough). Otherwise they often "forget" to go back and finish the practice session.

3) Teach the child not the system. There are a number of good methods for children (*cf.* Appendix III "Suggested Methods, Studies and Pieces for Students") but these nearly always need to be adapted to each student. If a method moves too quickly, assign supplementary pieces until his technique "catches up" with the method, then continue. Although rare, if a method moves too slowly, feel free to jump ahead, but make sure the progress is logical.

4) Don't be afraid of going over the student's head! Make explanations very clear, but children will grasp things much more easily and profoundly than you might imagine.

5) Use group lessons. While this can be a little extra work for you, if you have several children of roughly the same age and level, once a month or so have them all meet for a "group lesson." This is similar to the studio classes you will give for older students. Simply having them play through the same piece—together—will help develop their sense of ensemble, plus the chance to meet other students is often highly motivating.

How you charge for these lessons varies. Some teachers actually use these group lessons as a once-a-month lesson (if you do this, be sure and explain this in your "contract" with the parents). Some teachers charge an extra fee while some use group lessons as a make-up lesson.

It's really up to the teacher, but again, I strongly encourage this type of lesson for the social interaction, sense of camaraderie and as a motivating factor with your younger students.

6) Finally, make it interesting! Don't just "teach." Tell stories, make it exciting, play games, talk about the composers, *etc.* If you can win the loyalty of the student, and at the same time make it fun, I guarantee, he will practice.

If you find yourself in the midst of working with a number of children, I would strongly suggest taking some additional classes on musical development for children. There are some tremendous pedagogical techniques and methods exclusively for children that, sadly, are never addressed at the university level.