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# Suzuki benefits for children with dyslexia

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## Introduction

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I believe many of the challenges encountered by children with dyslexia when learning a musical instrument are addressed by the Suzuki approach. Teaching programmes for people with dyslexia need to be structured, sequential, cumulative, thorough and multisensory. Plenty of listening to music, repetition of assignments, participating in group lessons, learning initially by ear and activities aimed at building pupils' self-confidence are recommended. The Suzuki programme covers all these issues.

The ability to play a musical instrument offers enjoyment and satisfaction, and raises self-esteem. However, learning to play an instrument requires concentration, co-ordination and memory, as well as auditory, motor and spatial skills – all areas in which people with dyslexia may encounter difficulties. Common problems faced by those with dyslexia when studying music include learning notation, sight-reading, melodic and rhythmic repetition and maintaining a steady beat.

I consider that many of these problems, identified in the research literature (Oglethorpe, 2002, 2003; Overy, 2000, 2003), are addressed by the Suzuki approach. Indeed, Shinichi Suzuki claimed his 'mother-tongue' approach to teaching children was effective for *all* children unless severely brain-damaged or disabled (Suzuki, 1982).

There are no failures. Any child who can speak his native language has the potential to learn to play the piano. (Bigler and Lloyd-Watts, 1979, p. 2)

Rawson, writing in 1970, identifies the need for teaching programmes for people with dyslexia to be 'structured, sequential, cumulative, and thorough', as well as multisensory. With reference to learning music, the British Dyslexia Association (1996) emphasises the need to build new information on existing knowledge, while Westcombe (2001) stresses the importance of providing plenty of opportunities to revise previous work. Case studies of musicians with dyslexia by Backhouse (2001) and Ganschow *et al.* (1994) mention the importance of repetition and of listening to recordings when learning a new piece, the latter also claiming that rhythms are easiest to learn by hearing them. The Suzuki programme effectively covers all these issues.

The Suzuki approach is highly structured. Lessons often start when the child is 3 or 4 years old, when children's aural and motor (though not visual) skills are fully developed. Children begin by listening at length to recordings of the music they will learn in their first few lessons. They also listen to plenty of other good music so that the language of music becomes familiar to them. As with learning any language, it is best to start at an early age, and it is advantageous to be surrounded by the language before and while learning it. Children spend some weeks observing the lessons of other young pupils so that when they start their own lessons the environment, the teacher and the expectations will be known and understood by child and parent. Parents are greatly involved at this early stage, creating a positive, nurturing home environment, surrounding their child with music and observing lessons with their child.

From the very first lesson, posture and technique are emphasised as much as the importance of learning to listen to one's sound at the instrument. Teachers are careful to ensure that pupils start on suitably small-sized instruments; young pianists need an adjustable stool and footstool that allow them to sit comfortably with their feet firmly supported and not dangling. Children work sequentially through a common core repertoire of pieces, which gradually introduce and develop various musical and technical skills. The repertoire progresses from variations on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* through various folk songs, minuets and sonatas to major works by the classical composers: Bach and Mozart concertos on the violin, Haydn and Boccherini concertos on the cello and Bach's *Italian Concerto* on the piano, for example. Supplementary repertoire, including ensemble music, is often introduced by teachers according to the needs of each student.

The repertoire is carefully graded, each piece introducing one or two new techniques and otherwise building on the library of skills which the pupil is rapidly developing. The approach is thorough as pupils are required to master every musical and technical point in one piece before progressing to the next. Suzuki teachers give very specific instructions on how to practise to improve musicianship and technique. These instructions are demonstrated so the pupil can see and hear what is happening. The pupil will then be asked to repeat the exercise several times in the lesson so that the pupil, teacher and parent all know the pupil can achieve it. The parent notes down what is to be done and how, and encourages further repetitions at home. Dr Suzuki would ask pupils to practise an assignment many times, not so that they could play it correctly but so that they could not play it incorrectly (Suzuki, 1969).

The programme is cumulative as pupils are encouraged to maintain their past repertoire. Essential basic skills, such as listening to their sound and learning to produce a beautiful tone, as well as playing with accurate rhythm, balance and intonation, are improved mainly by working on review pieces, which are well known, rather than the newest, less-familiar piece.

Suzuki pupils learn using aural, visual and kinaesthetic senses. They continue to listen daily to recordings of the music they are learning. They observe other pupils' lessons before or after their own. They see their teacher demonstrate – they are asked to listen to the demonstration, to watch the hand and arm movements and may be invited to feel the movements by resting a hand on the teacher's hand. Because of the emphasis on technique from the very first lesson, they learn to be aware of every movement at their instrument; because of the emphasis on musicianship, they learn to listen very carefully to the sounds they are making. In the early stages, they learn by ear, removing the huge obstacle for many children with dyslexia of reading. Later, when learning music from the score, they continue to memorise very easily and normally perform from memory.

Suzuki children attend regular group lessons, in addition to their individual lessons, at which rhythm games and singing activity games are played. This type of activity is recommended by Overy (2000, 2003) following her studies of children with dyslexia. People with dyslexia have difficulty maintaining a steady beat (British Dyslexia Association, 1996). This can be helped by playing with other children in unison, duets or other ensembles at group lessons, as well as sometimes playing along with the recording as recommended by Suzuki teachers. Children learn well from their peers in groups, and there is the added benefit of the enjoyable social aspect of working together, developing musical skills in groups.

Music notation is generally taught to Suzuki children from their very first lesson in groups, through games with rhythm and pitch flash cards. Initially, Suzuki children play their instrument by ear. But once they have a secure technique and are producing a beautiful sound, they learn to read music while playing their instrument. Lauridsen (2002), a Danish piano teacher who has investigated using off-staff notation, traditional notation and no notation, considers that: 'not using any music notation at the beginning level may be a very effective method for developing important listening skills' (p. 14).

She thinks that advanced students are reluctant to engage in the process of elementary reading, and that they may find it difficult to unlearn the habit of looking at their hands when performing. In my experience it is a matter of carefully judging when to introduce reading skills at the instrument, having ensured that notation is learnt sequentially and thoroughly in group lessons. If reading is commenced at an appropriate time, Suzuki children have no particular problem in looking at the music and developing ear-eye-hand co-ordination, because their auditory and motor skills are so secure.

Indeed, Anderson (2006, p. 23, citing Odam, 1995) emphasises that:

'[R]eading music should never begin' until pupils are able to use and to manipulate 'musical sounds, procedures and constructions' fluently for themselves. [For those who] 'fear that pupils who learn initially by ear will never read as well as those who start reading notation in their earliest lessons . . . there is actually a growing body of evidence indicating that the reverse is true'.

Reading notation can be a huge difficulty for children with dyslexia. An approach which delays reading at the instrument until the aural and technical skills have been developed and allows independent, concentrated work on visual reading skills must be beneficial.

Backhouse (2001) mentions the low self-esteem that can easily develop in people with dyslexia. Typically, repeated scolding by unsympathetic teachers will destroy the child's self-confidence (Miles, 2001). Gilpin (2001), the mother of a cornet player with dyslexia, indicates that a structured approach with lots of repetition and praise is successful, and emphasises the importance of being well prepared for examinations. Suzuki teachers are trained to be very positive in their teaching and always to find something to praise before suggesting some aspect for improvement. They know it is essential for pupils to be thoroughly prepared for their regular concert performances, so that each performance is a good experience and builds self-confidence. As Suzuki

children receive enormous parental support, especially in the early stages, they can start their lessons very young. While Suzuki children with dyslexia may be behind their peers in some aspects of their learning, they may well be in advance of non-Suzuki children in their music-making, and this helps build their self-esteem.

Plenty of listening to music, repetition of assignments, participating in group lessons, learning initially by ear and building self-confidence are to be recommended for children with dyslexia. These issues are all addressed by the Suzuki approach. Qualified Suzuki teachers have followed long and intensive training courses which cover child development and psychology as well as pedagogical and musical skills. They are, therefore, able to teach effectively according to each pupil's strengths by being flexible in their application of the Suzuki approach.

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