

# **Adaptive Music Teaching Strategies for Unique Learners**

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## ***Part 1: The Individual***

Remember: Every student is different, and students with special needs are no exception to this diversity. It is critical that we strive to understand our students' preferences, strengths, and areas that will need additional support, no matter what level they're at. There is no one "correct" way to do things. Something might work for a while and then you'll need to change course. This provides an opportunity to "think outside the box" and really challenge your teaching skills!

Each challenge presents an opportunity, both to grow as an educator and to create a positive experience for your student. It is important to focus on your students specific learning needs rather than becoming overly concerned with diagnoses or levels. Observe what they're doing and focus your attention on what they CAN do rather than what they struggle with. Building upon these strengths can help set them up for success. Every person is different in their learning styles. Some students are visual learners and do better with seeing and imagining, others are auditory learners and prefer to listen and talk things through, still others are kinesthetic learners and learn best by doing. And of course there are people who are a combination of styles! Some of the tips we'll share here may work like magic for some students, while others may not fit their needs.

### **Meet your students where they are in terms of learning styles.**

Some students may be visual learners, others are auditory learners, and still others may benefit from hands-on or kinesthetic learning. Build your toolbox to include multiple ways to present information in order to meet each student where they're at.

- Consider color-coding your materials. For example, label keyboard keys with stickers so that each key corresponds to a color as well as a letter name.
- Use vibrant shades and potentially textured stickers for students who are visually impaired. Colors that are more distinct from each other are easier to perceive; for example, light blue and bright red are more distinct than light blue and light green. Additionally, you can utilize different patterns, some bumpy and some smooth stickers, or even braille stickers to convey information to students through tactile means.

- Represent information in a written form for students who benefit from seeing rhythms or notation on a page, but also represent information in an auditory form by playing the note or rhythm that the student is to play. Rhythmic patterns, for example, can often be difficult to understand at first when shown notation, but may become clearer when heard or paired with a common word or phrase. For example, quarter note-eighth note- eighth note becomes “strawberry”, four eighth notes become “watermelon”, etc.
- Provide sensory interventions for students that may need to reach a more regulated state for learning. This could include something as simple as a fidget or toy for them to use to keep their hands busy when not playing. Some students may benefit from periodic breaks to engage in a sensory activity of their choosing. Learning can also be done through tactile means, such as stomping a rhythm or having the student tap it on their body.
- Allow students to have input in how they learn materials. For example, if they are learning to read notes on the staff, they can work with their teacher to create their own mnemonic devices, pairing words and phrases they like and will remember with “EGBDF”, “GBDFA”, etc. While “Good boys do fine always” is a classic, “Good burritos don’t fall apart” can be a fun variation, and your students may have wonderful ideas of their own!
- Repeat information often, as many students benefit from repetition. A slightly different wording or presentation on a different day may reach a student in a unique way and allow the information to click!

### **Meet your students where they are emotionally.**

If you’re sensitive to their anger, apathy, excitement, or whatever else they may be exhibiting, you may be able to move things in a productive direction more quickly.

- Consider matching the emotion they’re expressing. For example, if your student is angry, maybe start the lesson with an angry-sounding improvisation. Existing in this space and then transitioning gradually into a more desirable emotion for the task at hand can be a more gradual shift than simply giving a prompt or verbal redirection to change the student’s behavior.
- Validate and simply state the emotion you’re seeing. Calling it by name will acknowledge and possibly begin to diffuse it (your student will correct you if you’re wrong, so there’s not much harm in trying). Be flexible and adjust your lesson plan in the moment.

## ***Part 2: Expectations***

It can be very helpful to have clear expectations so the student knows what is going to happen and can prepare to participate appropriately. One especially important tip is to have a schedule of events for the lesson. This can be specific or vague depending on the students' needs; the goal is just to have something that will take away the sense that anything could happen next or that the student doesn't have any control. To make a schedule of events, list specific items, like: C scale, G scale, C arpeggios, G arpeggios, etc., or specific pages or parts of pieces they're working on. Or, list more general things, like: warm-up, review last week, new technique, festival piece, etc.

If you give the student control over some aspect of the schedule, you are likely to have more buy-in from them. The student could choose the order of the events that you've chosen, which warm-up they do, or any number of other elements depending on the individual. Let them pick some of what they will play, whether that is playing preferred songs that they like listening to or allowing them to pick between a set of options. If they have a say in the music they play, students are more likely to be motivated to practice and reach their goals. It could be a good idea to have a system where the student is able to remove or cross off things as they are completed. This can provide a sense of accomplishment and can help keep them engaged and on-task.

Setting up expectations in the form of rules can also be very helpful. Many of the same tips apply here. You can be specific ("play the whole song through without stopping in the middle") or vague ("use appropriate language"). Involving the students in the process of creating rules can give them a sense of ownership and control. You can get the students input on what rules are most important or if there might be a rule they'd like to propose. This could take the form of a specific rule for you as the teacher too, such as "don't play the piano when I'm talking, and likewise I won't play when you're talking." These can be reviewed at each lesson, hung on the wall as a constant reminder, or just evoked when they're needed.

For many students there is a lot of anxiety around making mistakes. Sometimes kids exhibit behaviors because they're afraid of making mistakes. It can be helpful to have a "mistakes policy" so students feel more comfortable messing up, and this pressure is reduced. You could have a sign hung up in your studio that says how many mistakes are allowed during the lesson. Start with something ridiculous that the student will not reach during the lesson, like 100, and change it each week.

By providing a balance of structure, so that the student knows what to expect, and autonomy, so the student is a valued contributor in the learning process, you can position young musicians to reach their maximum potential!

## ***Part 3: Engagement***

This is a perfect opportunity to think outside the box. Know that it's okay to incorporate other instruments or activities into the lessons. If you're still learning about music or doing something that will advance their music skills, it is okay to move away from the lesson instrument. This can be especially helpful for young students or those with shorter attention spans.

- Employ a drum to talk about different rhythms. Perhaps doing a call-and-response activity to practice rhythms would be more engaging and fun than using the lesson instrument. Maybe the drum would be useful for finger autonomy; for example, you can play with finger 1, 2, 3, etc., then expand this to finger patterns, such as 1-2-3-2-1, or 5-4-3-2-1, etc.
- If you don't have a drum, body percussion could serve the same purpose. By adding stomping, clapping, skipping, or tapping beats wiggly students will have a chance to move while also reinforcing rhythmic concepts.
- Use recorded music to do some gross motor movement and get the student to feel the beat. You might ask the student to physically demonstrate high/low, heavy/light, fast/slow. Or you could have them do a mirroring activity and relate that to elements of music. It can make a dramatic difference to just let them move a little.
- Complete a workbook page together or some physical writing on a page. This can include notation, music theory, or listening maps!
- Use technology: iPad games, background loops on a keyboard, GarageBand, etc. can be very engaging. Or simply pull up a YouTube video that incorporates the student's preferred music or a concept you're addressing in lessons. Allowing students to share their favorite music video with you can work wonders for engagement.
- Change roles for a little while and have them "be the teacher" and teach you something they're interested in or know about. This could be a preferred song, a technology skill, or something they've learned in another class. Another way to facilitate this role switch is to give them a turn to be the "leader" during call-and-response or imitation activities.
- Allow opportunities for playing written music and playing by ear to work on both reading and listening skills.

If your student is losing interest you can present a different novel material you think they'll like, or have several options of books, activities, or songs. It's important to ask them what they want to do, but you may be faced with an "I don't know." In this situation, it's up to you to make an educated guess. Pick music that you think they will think is cool. In general, it's good to take a deep breath and relax/have fun (even in the most difficult situations). The students will take your cue.

## ***Part 4 – Monitoring and Communicating Progress***

We have discussed that every student is unique, and every student's progress is also individual. When teaching learners with diverse needs, it can be useful to let go of more traditional views about success in lessons. That is not to say that students aren't to be held accountable or that they won't demonstrate a high level of success. Pay attention to where your student began, and praise the victories that you see, no matter how small they may seem. After all, music can be an empowering tool and your students should be proud of their successes! The successes might be "smaller" or come less frequently than your "typical learners," and that's okay.

Some ideas that might help to facilitate or monitor progress:

- Use a practice schedule – set some sort of expectation for practice represented on a visible chart that they can show you. You may have to teach them how to practice and/or discuss obstacles they face at home. Rather than problem-solving for their specific environment, offer general suggestions that might work well and allow the student to select what's best for them.
- Use a system of rewards, making sure that it is specific to what motivates that individual.
- Repeat concepts and work on things, sometimes for much longer than you typically would. They will give you cues about their level of engagement.
- Break down concepts into smaller chunks. This can include working on one measure of a song at a time, learning one chord that you work on for multiple weeks, etc. Smaller bits of information are often more manageable than learning a lot of material at once. Then, these building blocks can be combined later to make a musical whole.
- If the student remains engaged and the parent is pleased with the lessons making music together in the space of the lesson and your patience in teaching musical concepts and techniques is what it's really about. In other words, the focus is on the **process** of making music over the musical **product**.

Open communication with parents regarding their child's progress is key, especially in tricky situations. It can make a world of difference in your confidence and comfort level if you make a point to connect with the parents each week to let them know what happened in the lesson. This can include both the successes and the areas of difficulty. For example, "Tom enjoyed stomping his feet to different rhythms, but played piano when I was talking and refused to play most songs." Please keep in mind that it is not your job or responsibility to diagnose a child. Stick to the objective facts and work with what you're presented with. Don't be concerned about knowing everything or labeling your students.

Ultimately, it's up to the parent to decide if you are being effective and if they want to continue with music for their child. There are times when it is appropriate to say, "we haven't made any progress, perhaps piano lessons aren't the best choice for your child at this time." At the same time, if parents support the expectations you set for the lesson or music class when their student is at home, these are more likely to stick. Parents also know the student's behaviors and preferences outside of music class, so may be able to share valuable information about the student's learning style. Some important questions to ask parents include:

- What does the child like?
- What do they succeed in?
- What challenges them?
- What do they hope to get out of the lesson or class?