

Finding the Right Private Music Teacher for Your Child

So, your child has asked for music lessons – maybe it’s piano or voice or violin or...drums! Or maybe you recognize you’ve got a budding Mozart on your hands at home, or just a piano that needs a player. Of course, you’ll need a teacher. What to do next? It’s a complex process, finding that teacher who is just right for your child. It may seem like the easy road to just look for the least expensive teacher who is the closest to home. After all, you have no guarantee that this momentary interest in music might suddenly be traded in for soccer or Scouting or horseback riding next week, right? Don’t give in to this exhausted parent urge to oversimplify. Because choosing the right teacher for your child can often determine whether or not they *want* to continue their music lessons. If you want your child to develop musically, you must put some effort in to finding the professional teacher who is the best match for your child’s personality, abilities and goals. It is a myth that “anyone can teach a beginner”. In fact, giving a music student the right start is often the most challenging part of the process. The right teacher can make all the difference. In this article, I hope to give you some guidance as to how to find that teacher for your child.

Step 1: Define your goals and expectations: Ask yourself why your child is taking music lessons and why now? Are lessons something you see as part of your child’s basic education, just like math and reading or is music an “extra”, “for fun” activity? Do you want your child to be able play in the band or orchestra or for others at church or school? What types of music interest your child or what types of music would you like your child to learn – classical, jazz, rock, blues, a combination of styles? What sort of learner is your child? Would s/he benefit from a teaching environment with lots of structure, challenge and accountability or do you have a more laid back child who wants a slower pace, finding joy in the journey? How do you and your child feel about performing in public? Do you really have time for weekly lessons and daily practice? Learning to read and play music well will take years. Can you see your child making this a long term commitment? These are only some of the important considerations and you can doubtless come up with more. The important thing is to know what you want, and then to be ready to be flexible in readjusting those goals in discussion with an experienced music teacher!

Step 2: Get some names: There are lots of places to get the names of local music teachers. Music stores often carry lists of teachers, although they may be predisposed towards recommending their own teachers if they offer lessons at the store. School music teachers often have lists as well. Check the yellow pages. Ask friends and neighbors who have children in music lessons for their recommendations. Your local music teachers organizations are also helpful in this regard. Lancaster Music Teachers Association offers a free music teacher referral service consisting of member teachers who are currently accepting students (call LMTA Referral Coordinator Candy Tame at 898-7955 or email to franktame@aol.com).

Step 3: Get on the phone: You can learn a lot about a potential music teacher over the phone in a brief conversation. Of course, you will want the practical information –

availability, studio location, lesson fees – but please, don't stop there! Ask the teacher about his/her professional education and experience. A simple “Can you tell me about your background in music?” will yield a lot of information. A professional teacher will be thrilled that you asked and should be happy to provide a written resume and/or a verbal summary of her credentials. Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's degrees in music (particularly in the field of pedagogy – the study of teaching techniques) are always impressive and are certainly a good sign. However, do not discount teachers with less formal education, particularly those with many years of teaching experience. Also, ask if the teacher keeps up with the latest in the field by attending conferences or taking courses at local universities and colleges. Active involvement with a music teachers organization (Music Teachers National Association, MENC, Musical Arts Society, National Guild of Piano Teachers, etc.) is also an excellent sign that the teacher is engaged in his profession and makes learning a priority. You may also ask if the teacher is certified (by the public schools, by MTNA, by the American College of Musicians or by the Royal American Conservatory to name a few). Also find out if the teacher has experience performing on her instrument. Good performers do not always make good teachers, but it is hard to be a good teacher without having a fair amount of performance experience. Of course, don't discount the “gut” impressions you receive while speaking with the teacher. Is the teacher courteous, professional, responsive? It's perfectly OK to ask the teacher for the names of students or parents who can act as references. Or, you might want to attend a recital of the teacher's students.

Step 4: Interviews: After narrowing your list with a few phone calls, make an appointment to meet with the teacher(s) you feel best about. Expect to pay the teacher's usual lesson fee or an interview fee for this time. Use the interview period to confirm the teacher's credentials and experience and ask any questions you might have. Take time to look around the studio environment. Is it a place you would want to learn? Usually, the teacher will want to interview you and your child as to your expectations and background in music. Also, many teachers like to perform basic musical testing with the student, especially if the student is transferring from another teacher, to assess sight reading ability, technique and aural abilities. A professional teacher will have a studio policy regarding payment, absences and expectations (such as how much to practice, performance requirements, whether parents may attend lessons, etc.). Again, watch how the teacher interacts with your child. Check your “gut” (and your child's “gut”) to see if it's a good match. If you are interviewing with more than one teacher, don't be afraid to be up front about that. Teachers expect you to “shop around” and will not take offense.

Step 5: The final choice: If both you and the teacher agree that you've got a good match – then you're set to go. If you're not sure, take your time. A music teacher may impact your child's life for 10 or more years, spending individual lesson time with your child nearly every week. That's a major influence on your child for good or ill. Don't take it lightly.

Good luck to all you parents as you search for the best for your children. Happy music making!