



TEACHING NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS: A Guide for Instrumental Teachers

By Daphne Proietto and the Keys of Life Foundation

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Instrumental lessons can become a place of safety, confidence and genuine joy for neurodivergent students. With thoughtful adjustments, teachers can reduce anxiety, build on strengths and support meaningful musical progress.

1. Start with Learning by Ear

Begin with sound before notation. Encourage students to listen to their pieces often and become familiar with how the music sounds before attempting to play it. When the sound is already internalised, students can focus on producing it rather than decoding symbols.

Learning by ear:

- reduces cognitive load
- removes the 'unknown', therefore reducing anxiety
- builds confidence quickly
- draws on strengths in pitch and memory.

Many neurodivergent students thrive when music is experienced aurally first.

'Music notation was a barrier that caused years of frustration. Daphne's approach — teaching by ear first, then slowly introducing notation — has played to his strengths, giving him greater access to music and a sense of accomplishment. That confidence has flowed into other areas of his life.'

2. Make Lessons Fun

Fun is foundational. Many neurodivergent students experience frequent criticism in daily life. Let your time together be a time where they only hear positive feedback. If something needs fixing, demonstrate the correct way rather than saying, 'That bit's wrong.'

- Lessons should highlight their strengths.
- Use games and props.
- Create playful rhythm words.
- Personalise lyrics.
- Celebrate small achievements.

Many autistic students have strong pitch (often they have perfect pitch), memory and attention to detail. Build on these strengths and make success visible.



3. Introduce Note Reading When Ready

Reading music adds significant visual and cognitive demands. Students must process pitch, rhythm and spatial relationships, then transfer that information to their instrument. For many learners, this is overwhelming early on. Some students will later add reading skills. Others may not — that's totally fine if they are engaged and progressing musically. The teacher's goal in this case is to create a safe, inclusive space where the child is supported to explore music, express themselves freely, and flourish at their own pace.

'Before studying with Daphne, I'd had piano lessons for 10 years but hadn't really enjoyed them or made much progress. She realised I struggled to read two lines of music at once, so we went back to basics and I learned melodies by ear before gradually reintroducing reading. It made all the difference — I went on to complete a Bachelor of Music.'

4. Reduce Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the biggest barriers to learning. Students may fear making mistakes, misunderstanding instructions or being asked to do something unexpected.

Signs may include shutdown, agitation or tears.

Strategies:

Warmly welcome students.

Provide a simple visual plan of what is going to happen in the lesson.

- Start with something familiar.
- Demonstrate rather than over-explain.
- Only introduce small amounts of new material.

Use constructive language.

Avoid impatience or saying something is 'easy.'

'Daphne was always very kind and soft spoken. This made my lessons very comfortable and meant I would always feel very calm being there.'

Meltdowns

When overwhelmed, reasoning does not work. Prevention is key — notice triggers and avoid pushing too far. If a meltdown occurs, remain calm, use minimal language and allow time for regulation. Your calm presence is essential.

Teaching Neurodivergent Students continued.

5. Use Visual Supports

Visual structure reduces uncertainty.

- written lesson plans
- tick-off schedules
- picture boards
- limited choices (2–3 options).



Clear boundaries and predictable structure create safety.

6. Talk Less, Play More.

Music is processed differently from speech. Many neurodivergent students have difficulty processing speech. Whenever possible, show rather than tell.

- If verbal instructions are needed:
- keep them brief
- repeat as necessary
- do not assume instant understanding.

When we analysed one of Daphne's 25-minute lessons she spoke for less than 3 minutes. She played introductions to get pieces started. She demonstrated what she wanted on the piano. She pointed to keys to help the student find the right note.

7. Adapt to Processing Differences

Some students focus intensely on detail and struggle with the 'big picture.'

This may show as difficulty reading multiple staves or processing complex notation.

Support them by:

- using uncluttered sheet music
- breaking music into small sections
- highlighting patterns (use coloured highlighter pens)
- introducing complexity gradually
teaching through visual, auditory and tactile cues.



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teaching through visual, auditory and tactile cues.

Work with their strengths rather than against them.

8. Reward and Celebrate Progress



Learning an instrument is demanding. Especially at the beginning, encouragement matters. You can use:

- praise
- small rewards like stickers
- videoing a piece to share with family.

Celebrate each small win. Lessons may be one of the few places where students consistently experience success.

9. Work with Parents

When possible, involve parents in lessons. They can reinforce strategies at home and support practice routines.

A collaborative approach improves outcomes.

10. Be Flexible and Realistic

Progress is individual. Some students move quickly; others need more time.

Set expectations just above the student's current level. Often one new concept per lesson is enough.

There is no single correct method. Let teaching decisions be guided by what benefits that student most.

11. Be Like a Duck

Even if you are working hard behind the scenes, remain calm on the surface.

Students need a teacher who is warm, steady, encouraging and predictable.

Your regulated presence is one of your most powerful tools.

FINAL THOUGHT

When anxiety is reduced and strengths are celebrated, instrumental lessons can become a sanctuary — a place where neurodivergent students feel safe and experience belonging and achievement.

For training on teaching instrumental music to neurodivergent learners visit <https://keysoflife.com.au/learning-and-courses/>

We offer face-to-face courses, online courses and with online learning modules which can be done any time.



