



DIFFERENT MINDS, SHARED MUSIC

A Parents' Guide to
Helping Neurodivergent
Children Flourish
Through Music

WELCOME TO KEYS OF LIFE

About Keys of Life

The Keys of Life Foundation (KoL) began in 2017, inspired by a group of parents whose children were discovering the joy of piano under Daphne Proietto's guidance.

Daphne had been teaching piano to children with a range of disabilities and neurodivergence for over twenty years and was featured on 60 MINUTES in a segment called 'Unlocking Autism'. The program showed the incredible benefits her teaching approach was having on her students' lives. After it aired, she was inundated with enquiries from families keen for their children to thrive through music — more than Daphne could possibly support.

The Keys of Life Foundation was set up to help Daphne train the teachers of the future, enabling more children to access her methods.

[Unlocking Autism - 60 Minutes](#)



Daphne Proietto

About Daphne

Daphne Proietto OAM, BMus Ed, Diploma Music Therapy.

Daphne began teaching students with disabilities and diverse learning needs in 2000. Word quickly travelled through musical circles of the amazing outcomes experienced by her students, enabled through Daphne's innate understanding of how to harness the diverse strengths each of her students possess.

Daphne has extended her approach to work with children who have many different disabilities. The deep mutual respect she and her students have for one another is testament to her immense success as a teacher and mentor.



About this Guide

This guide is for parents of neurodivergent children, children with disabilities, and children with diverse learning needs who are considering instrumental music lessons.

Inside you'll find:

Part 1: Why Learn a Musical Instrument?

- The **changes** our parents have seen since their children started music
- The **overall benefits** of learning a musical instrument
- The science behind why **music supports brain development**
- The **unique strengths** that many neurodivergent children possess that helps them to flourish through music.

Part 2: How to Get Started

- **Advice from our parents** about supporting your child through music lessons
- How to **find a teacher**
- Frequently asked questions
- Tips on helping your child establish a **good practice routine**
- A guide to give your child's music teacher

Most importantly, this guide is here to reassure you: there is no single 'right' pathway. Musical journeys look different for every child — and that's exactly it should be.

The Difference Music Makes

Instrumental lessons are taught **one-on-one**. This allows the teacher to design an individual pathway for each student — **progressing at their pace**, celebrating small wins, and **building confidence** step by step.

What Parents Notice:

'One of the most noticeable changes has been my child's growing confidence. Mastering new pieces, performing in recitals, and overcoming practice challenges has deepened her sense of achievement. She's learned that perseverance leads to success—a mindset she now applies to schoolwork and sports too.'

'Music has opened up opportunities in school — band camps, social connections, performances, all leading to a huge boost in self-esteem and confidence. The ability to play every evening is a stress reliever and an important part of his daily routine.'

'Music has become a powerful outlet for my child to express her emotions. Whether she's feeling joyful, stressed, or reflective, sitting at the piano gives her a way to process and release those feelings in a healthy, creative way.'

'Through ensemble work and concerts, she has made friends who share her passion. Music has become a shared language.'

'He has learnt to focus for more sustained periods.'

'Not every practice session is easy. But through those experiences, my child has learned to manage his frustration and keep going.'

The Science Behind Music Learning



Music Strengthens Brain Functions

Regular practice strengthens the brain areas responsible for seeing, hearing and moving — skills that transfer into everyday tasks.



Music Improves Fine Motor Skills

Students who study piano show measurable improvements in finger strength and coordination.



Music Supports Communication

Music does not rely on spoken language. It provides an alternative pathway for expression and connection.



Music Reduces Stress

Slow, gentle music can lower heart rate, reduce stress hormones and help regulate emotions.



Music Builds Confidence

Performing — even in small settings — builds resilience and self-belief.

[Find the Research](#)

The Unique Strengths of Neurodivergent Learners

Many neurodivergent children and children with disabilities bring a wide range of strengths that can help them learn a musical instrument. These strengths don't look the same for every child, but music can offer meaningful ways to engage, express and grow at every ability level.



CREATIVITY

Many children with disabilities are naturally drawn to sound, rhythm and musical patterns and enjoy experimenting and improvising. Research shows that musical patterns, beat and improvisation can be real strengths for these children, giving them a powerful way to communicate non verbally and providing a creative outlet to express feelings and ideas.

'Music has helped my child, who is blind, in many ways. It's his calming mechanism, his creative outlet and way of expressing himself. Without music in his life, life would be less fun.'

PERFECT PITCH

Perfect or absolute pitch is the ability to identify or reproduce a musical note without a reference. This allows people to recognise notes and melodies with remarkable precision, making it easier to play by ear.

Many of Daphne's students – from **autistic students to those with vision impairment** – have developed perfect pitch. When they hear a piece of music, they don't need to guess the notes on the piano—they instinctively know them and can go straight to the keys. That doesn't mean they can play it straight away; they still need help with fingering and coordinating both hands. But it gives them a big advantage — they know what note is coming next.

STRONG ROTE AND AUDITORY MEMORY



Neurodivergent students may also be highly attuned to sound patterns, rhythm and repetition and may find these musical elements comforting.

Furthermore many students have well developed auditory memory abilities, which enables them to retain and reproduce musical passages after hearing them only a few times. These advantages can make music learning both intuitive and deeply rewarding, helping students express themselves, build confidence and develop focus through an artform that naturally aligns with their skills.

FOCUS

Music often captures attention in a way that feels natural and motivating. They often use music to help themselves calm down, concentrate, or shift their mood.

ADHD and Attention

ADHD isn't a lack of attention, but a difference in how attention is regulated. When a child with ADHD is interested or emotionally engaged, their attention can 'lock on' very deeply. Many parents and teachers notice this during creative activities, especially music.

This deep focus (often called **hyperfocus**) can be a real advantage. During these times, children may take in new information quickly and develop skills faster than usual. At other times attention may fluctuate and that's ok. Lessons can be adapted to support both.

'Music makes my mind feel clearer and more peaceful. When I play, I feel focused and proud of myself, like I can actually do hard things.'
Student with ADHD

'Music has given my daughter more than a skill; it has given her a sense of steadiness and belief in herself. Over time, we've seen her attention grow stronger, her emotions settle more easily, and her confidence blossom in ways that reach far beyond music.'
Parent of a child with ADHD

What this can look like in music lessons:

Music lessons can also strengthen skills like paying attention, staying focused, and managing emotions. **During lessons, students may:**

- **become highly engaged** when the music or activity genuinely interests them
- show **bursts of strong progress** when they're in a focused, motivated state
- **learn certain skills quickly**, such as memorisation, technique, rhythm, or improvisation
- **display creativity** and willingness to experiment with sound and musical ideas.

DIVERSE WAYS OF LEARNING

Everyone learns differently. For some young people, playing music is a much more straightforward way of learning, as opposed to traditional reading and writing. Skills learnt in music can then benefit other subjects.

For example, learning a musical instrument strengthens the listening and rhythm skills that many dyslexic children find challenging. Music gives them a structured, enjoyable way to practise timing, sound discrimination and pattern recognition — all of which support reading and language development.

Most importantly, music lessons boost confidence. Because music is hands-on, creative and multisensory, many children experience success quickly. Whether they choose drums, piano, singing or another instrument, music offers a motivating pathway that supports their strengths while gently reinforcing the skills they find harder.

Not only can piano help with improving fine motor skills, but it plays an important role in improving mental health, as articulated by one of Daphne's students with cerebral palsy.

'Piano is essential to my mental health. Hours upon hours of my life have been spent in therapists' offices, often repeating the same exercises again. Piano, however, is nothing like that. Piano has always been about learning and playing for fun.

While playing angsty music, my mind is quiet, grounded, at peace. My thoughts and anxieties are muffled and muted, my sadness is healthily processed and my body feels both light and full. That sensation is what I use music for and what, I believe, music is made for. Music is there as a tool for comfort and healing.'

GETTING STARTED

Advice from Parents:



'Journeys can be very different. Whilst some students will excel in a traditional sense, others will equally benefit from a less traditional journey. It is so important to encourage a love of music rather than making it a chore.'

'Remember that progress will be slow at first. Be patient! Be positive! Make it enjoyable!'

'I didn't anticipate how crucial the teacher-student relationship is. A great teacher who is both inspiring and nurturing can make all the difference in keeping a child motivated. We changed teachers once because the first one was technically skilled but lacked warmth and flexibility.'

'You need to be there at all times, especially when the child is young. Encourage them to be on the stage at any opportunity, to be brave.'

'Sit in on lessons with a notebook to take notes or a phone to film videos of lessons.'

'Attend lessons if possible and take notes on what they need to work on at home. If it's not possible, ask the teacher to provide video or written outlines'.

Advice from Parents Continue

'Support them to practise each day. This is vital, as a lack of practice at home will severely limit their progress. Many parents use rewards for practice sessions (such as a sticker on each piece they play).'

This is the most important thing
↑ you can do to help. ↑

'It's an investment in your child in so many ways. Never underestimate how important learning an instrument is. Stick with it. Try to make it a priority.'

'Offer encouragement, praise effort over results, and show them that you're proud of their commitment to try.'

'Make space for this in your routine in a way that you can enjoy the early years and not make it stressful. They soon become more independent.'



'Be patient and supportive. There will be moments of frustration, missed notes, slow progress, or even wanting to quit. Be your child's cheerleader. Remind them (and yourself) that learning music is a journey that builds not just skill, but character.'

'Students should learn by ear when first starting (reading music can present a barrier to progress). In order to learn by ear successfully, they need to listen to their pieces in advance many times. Help them to do that. Have the music on in the car or at home. That way, they already know how the piece should sound, so learning it is easier.'

'Make sure you understand how much of your own time will be needed, to ensure success.'

Frequently Asked Questions

- **What happens in a music lesson?** The teacher will work one-on-one with your child, guiding them through how to play their instrument, how to learn pieces, how to read music and how to practise at home to improve.
- **How much do lessons cost?** Different states have different recommended rates. In Victoria, the VMTA recommended rates can be found here. <https://www.vmta.org.au/teachers/vmta-recommended-rates/>
- **How often do lessons happen?** Once a week.
- **How long do they go for?** Usually 30 minutes, although for very young children it may be 20 minutes and for much more experienced students it can be 60 minutes.
- **Do I have to go with my child?** It's best if you do. Then you can take notes about what they need to work on and help them at home.
- **What if I don't have time to help them at home?** Then their progress will be much slower. Most of the improvement your child makes will be done at home.
- **Does my child need to know how to read music?** No, they'll learn as they go.
- **How do I know if they'll stick with it?** You don't, but picking an instrument they like and having a supportive teacher helps.
- **How much should they practise?** Start with 10 minutes a day. Increase as they improve.
- **What if they don't want to practise?** That's normal. Use routines and rewards. Encourage them positively.
- **How long before we see improvement?** Usually within 3–6 months, depending on effort.
- **I'm not musical—how can I help?** You can support by showing interest, helping them with practice time, attending performances and celebrating their progress.

How Do I Find the Right Music Teacher?



- Ask around.
- Ask about qualifications.
- Enquire if the teacher has taught neurodivergent children before and how they have adapted their teaching to cater for their needs.
- Ask if they are happy to teach by ear to begin with (not going straight to sheet music).
- Ask if they are happy for you to sit in with the lessons. If the answer is no, find a different teacher. (When you are sitting in the lessons, don't interrupt. Just take notes on what your child needs to work on at home.
- Check they have a Working With Children Check.
- Ask if they have done any extra training around working with neurodivergent children.
- Do a trial lesson if you want (you will need to pay for it).
- Give the teacher the handout at the end of this book.

In Australia each state has an **instrumental music teacher's association**. Teachers who are registered with an association must hold a Working With Children check, undergo professional development and prove their qualifications. **These are a good place to start**, as is asking around for recommendations. Each of these associations has a 'find a teacher' page.

VICTORIA - Victorian Music Teachers' Association
<https://www.vmta.org.au/>

NEW SOUTH WALES - Music Teachers' Associations of New South Wales.
<https://mtansw.org.au/>

QUEENSLAND - Queensland Music Teachers' Association
<https://www.qmta.org.au/>

SOUTH AUSTRALIA - The Music Teachers' Association of South Australia
<https://mtasa.com.au/>

WEST AUSTRALIA: West Australian Music Teachers' Association
<https://wamta.au/>

TASMANIA - Tasmanian Music Teachers' Association
<https://www.tmta.com.au/>



The Suzuki Method starts with all music learnt by ear, which is supported by the Keys of Life Foundation. Suzuki Music teachers can also be found in each state.



How Do I Help My Child Practise?

CREATE A ROUTINE

Start with just 5–10 minutes each day. Getting the routine set up is the main goal. When a child learns something new, they need to practise it again within a couple of days. If they don't, the brain starts to forget the neural pathway and it has to be re-learned. Regular practice is vital.

Link practice to something predictable

- After-school snack
- Before screens
- Same time each day (if possible)

Building habits will help reduce resistance.



PROTECT YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Practice is hard, especially at first. Your relationship with your child matters more than perfect pieces. Take a few moments to get in a good frame of mind before helping with practice. Keep all your feedback positive. Stay calm. Make it enjoyable. Make up games. Use bribes if needed (stickers, food, screen time). Over time bribes can be faded out.

PRACTICE IS FINITE

Open-ended practice feels endless.

You can use:

- a timer
- a checklist with a number of clear tasks.

When the tasks are done, practice is done.

START WITH WHAT THEY CAN DO

Begin practice with something they already play well. It creates momentum and puts the brain in a 'success state.'

DON'T CRITICISE

Mistakes are part of learning. Small mistakes are normal and helpful. When children notice and fix errors, their brains grow stronger connections.

If you constantly criticise your child's playing, practice times will become unhappy. Instead of criticising, ask:

'What did you notice?' and 'Which bit do you think you might work on today?'

This builds independent musicianship. Having to stop mid-piece annoys students and puts them off. Let them play the piece right through if they know it, then they can identify a section to work.

CELEBRATE EFFORT, NOT JUST THE RIGHT NOTES

Praise focus, persistence, and problem-solving:

- 'I love how you kept trying that hard bit.'
- 'You really concentrated on that rhythm.'

This builds resilience.

OFFER LIMITED CHOICE

Allow choice in:

- order of pieces
- which section to tackle first
- using a timer or a checklist.

Having some control reduces resistance.

SLOW IT DOWN

Slow, accurate repetition builds strong neural pathways. Fast repetition builds mistakes.

TRACK PROGRESS VISUALLY

Kids often feel like they're not improving.

Use:

- a sticker chart
- a 'bars mastered' list
- a recording once a month to compare.

Visible progress builds motivation.

USE DIFFERENT SENSES

Saying note names out loud, clapping rhythms, tapping feet, or singing along all strengthen learning.

ADJUST WHEN NEEDED

Fatigue, workload, or overly difficult repertoire often drive resistance. Be aware of what might be affecting your child's drive and adjust your expectations.

END ON A HIGH NOTE

Finish practice with:

- A favourite piece
- A duet with you
- Something fun or creative

Ending positively increases the chance they'll want to practise tomorrow.



As your child progresses and develops good practice habits, your help will be needed less and less. Taking the time to set up those habits will pay off in the long run.

Teaching Neurodivergent Students: A Guide for Instrumental Teachers

by Daphne Proietto and the Keys of Life Foundation

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.



introducing complexity gradually
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.

