

Dear Teachers,

I was reading recent emails on the ECL about struggling students, people needing breaks, etc. and wanted to share my own experience. I have always noticed that many parents feel worn down in May and June, and this year was no exception. In the past I had three groups sail through level 4 without any issues. This year, however, almost all of my level 4 students seemed to be struggling, and 3 told their parents they wanted to quit. All of these families had other things going on at home that added to the stress. So I decided to send out this letter to encourage my life coaches. I think it really helped, and I feel everyone was in a good place before summer break. The subject line in my letter to parents was just "I hate piano!!".

Dear Life Coaches (AKA: Moms and Dads),

Did the title of this email catch your attention? I'm hoping you haven't heard that statement in your own houses, but I'll confess I've heard it in mine from time to time. I also confess I said something like that to my own parents when I was in elementary school.

By now you have all seen the "Long Term Relationship" graph that we use in class from time to time, and you are familiar with the idea that, if we are in something (almost anything, really) for the long haul our emotions will experience that familiar ebb and flow... I like it, I love it, I hate it, I can take it or leave it, I love it, I hate it, I'm bored with it, I like it again etc. I look at piano lessons as a way to teach my kids how to get familiar, even comfortable with, that cycle and learn the value of sticking with something through the good, bad and ugly times.

It has been on my mind to write this email as a means of encouraging you for at least two weeks now. Why? Because this tends to be that time of year where we are all getting a little weary.

We see June approaching and we are ready for a break from all those winter commitments; our kids sense spring in the air (even in Social, land of perpetual summer!). Also, I have 8 students currently in Foundation 4, and that tends to be a milestone for many students. Pieces are a little more challenging, new tools are being mastered, and we are balancing longer playlists with numerous projects. Helping our kids adjust to these changes needs a little extra tender loving care.

So, what helps me as I coach my kids through the tough patches? Here are a few things that may help some of you as well:

1. I remember the Big Picture.

Before we ever started the boys in music lessons Bart and I had decided that, along with solid academics, our kids were also going to learn to A) swim B) play piano C) be reasonably comfortable speaking in public. Other activities they chose to explore were up to them, but these were non-negotiable. When complaints arise, since quitting isn't an option, we search for other creative solutions.

2. I remember I am giving my kids the gift of music.

Some gifts are easy to give. When we gave the boys certain Star Wars lego sets at Christmas it was very easy. They knew exactly what they wanted and the boxes were even easy to wrap! In contrast, the gift of music is much more complicated. There is a time commitment for all of us. There are also times when I have to confront, insist, plan rewards, and give consequences. But, unlike the lego kit, this is a gift that will last their lifetime. I do not know what form it will take, but I am convinced it will be lifelong.

3. I try to be a problem solver.

Sometimes I just have to be the strong one, put my foot down and say "I know you don't like it but you are doing it anyway," until the boys are mature enough to do this for themselves. But other times I have needed to listen, find out where things were breaking down and help them come up with a plan. This may involve talking to their teacher, too.

My next email on this theme, will cover a few specific ideas that can help at home.

For now, I want to say a huge thank-you to all of you, who are doing a fantastic job giving your kids the "gift of music". If you related to this email in any way, I encourage you to hang in there! You just never know where that gift will be used in your child's future. Check out these possibilities:

Neil Moore: required by his parents to take lessons and practice 20 minutes a day for several years. Ended up creating a whole new approach for learning piano, accordion, and soon guitar as well!

Stephen Harper (prime minister of Canada): after a stressful day at the "office" comes home and unwinds at the piano

Jordan McConnell: wanted to quit guitar in elementary school, currently on tour, playing a guitar he built himself, in Japan

Shirley Brewer: at age 88, with vision and hearing impairments, can still enjoy sitting down at the piano to play her songs

Me: If you had told me in 7th grade I would one day be a piano teacher, I would have rolled my eyes and said "Never!"

Have a great weekend, everyone! Hope your pianos are singing today!