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Dreams Lead to Piano Lessons for 4-year-old son

By Robin DeMerell

When my daughter was little, I dreamed of her playing the piano. When she was 7, I hired a piano teacher to come to the house. Sarah hated it, squirmed around, never practiced and eventually the poor teacher had to call it quits. I waited a few years before trying again. I dreamed of her recital - she would wear a velvet dress with a ribbon in her hair. Tears would stream down my face as her long, thin fingers glided up and down the keys. The audience would gasp at her magnificent talent. But, then came the dreaded words I would hear again and again. The teacher again told me that Sarah's heart wasn't in it and that maybe piano wasn't for her. My dreams were dashed. I played the piano when I was young and, while I was good, I regretfully didn't pursue it, but always wished I did. I wanted to give Sarah the opportunity to live out my dreams. But she had different ideas.

What I learned - after many arguments and tears - was that no matter what you do, children have hopes and dreams of their own. You can't mold them - you can only support them and guide them along their way. My husband and I enrolled our son Noah in karate lessons when he was just 3. We thought he would love it and that it would be a good outlet for all his aggression and energy. All he did was run around and beat up all the punching bags and blocks. Several times they had to pick his little body off the floor and pry a practice pillow out of his tiny clenched hands. So, you can imagine my delight when Noah turned 4 last year and asked for piano lessons. I immediately called The Music Learning Center in Danbury . They said he was a bit young and that I should wait until he was 5. But when Noah begged for lessons, it was music to my ears. He won't be 5 until October, but they agreed to start him for four weeks to see how he did. He's enrolled in a group session, which I had never heard about. It costs \$18 an hour. Noah was so excited about his first lesson - he talked about it all week. There are five students, all 5 or 6 years old, in his class. His piano teacher, Juan Torres, who earned a music degree from Western Connecticut State University, said children can start playing at age 3, but he said 5 or 6 is a better age. "When they're 5, they are in the regiment of going to school and understanding teacher/student relationships and following directions," Torres said. Torres said it's great to expose young children to music to develop their interest, but parents shouldn't expect miracles.

"The output is quite small, but what seems to happen is when they approach 7, 8 and 9 (years), something seems to happen that doesn't happen with other students (who start lessons later). You don't see immediate results, you see it much later. I'm a strong advocate for having them start that early."

The children started with books that label music notes with numbers instead of letters and they read the numbers off pictures of piano keys. It is a rudimentary way of reading music that allows children to "read" and play without getting bogged down in learning the complicated language of music. "From there we can start building their music terminology," Torres said.

One lesson a week can take a younger student through basic music terminology, Torres said, such as whole and half notes and basic rhythm knowledge. They can also learn to play with both hands although probably not at the same time. "At 5 years old to move your fingers up and down is a fine motor skill and it's just being defined at that age," Torres said. Torres said the group classes are ideal for younger children. "I think there is a stigma that the group class is a stepping stone into private lessons," he said. "It's just a different approach. Most parents think it's a friendly environment - to have their peers around. "For me, as a teacher, to have the group dynamic is awesome. We can do things together as a whole. It's lot of fun."

Each child sits at an electronic keyboard equipped with headphones. The keyboards are integrated into a central control panel. The instructor can select students to play alone or in pairs. "I can play and they can hear as their keyboards are dismantled," Torres said. "It helps control what's going on in the classroom with the touch of a button. And it provides a quiet learning environment."

Patrick McMahan of New Fairfield, whose daughter Marissa turns 6 in August, said he and his wife Marjorie thought about starting her on the piano earlier and then "we decided to wait until she was 5 or 6." The couple recently purchased a grand piano for their home, but no one in the family plays piano. "We thought, if we have a piano, somebody should probably play," McMahan said.

Regina West of Danbury said when her daughter Michaela started sitting at the piano and tinkling the keys, she knew it was time. West's son, Johnell, now a music major at Southern Connecticut State University, started when he was 8 and now loves it. But, West said his success didn't factor in on starting 5-year-old Michaela on piano lessons this summer. "She shows an interest," said West. "She really enjoys coming. I'm hoping she develops an interest to play when she's older."

Noah, too, has shown a real interest. He's in such a good mood after his lesson and he tells me everything he learned. He practices almost every day, although we keep the practice down to about 10 minutes a time, so he doesn't get bored. He loves to tell people he plays the piano. Okay, so Noah won't be wearing a velvet dress with a ribbon in his hair, but if he continues to enjoy his lessons, he'll have a pastime that he can enjoy all his life.

For more information on piano lessons, contact The Music Learning Center at (203) 748-1444.