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Teaching Very Young Children

PENNY SEWELL

I ORIGINALLY became involved with teaching young children when the children of two of my adult students asked if they could have guitar lessons too. My first pupils were Luke aged four, Thomas aged five and my own daughter Rebecca, who was three at the time. I had some experience of working with young children because both of my own children have had Suzuki violin lessons. Helen Brunner, a well-respected Suzuki violin teacher, gave them their first lessons.

New pupils usually come to me through meeting my existing pupils. First I ask the parent (usually the mother) to bring the child to watch both individual and group lessons. I believe it is extremely important for the child, especially the pre-school children, to watch other children having lessons so that they learn how to behave in a lesson, and also because it is extremely motivating.

I have found from experience that the children make much better and faster progress if I have first taught one of the parents the early song accompaniments which I use to teach *tirando* strokes, and the first variation of *Twinkle* with the PICCADILLY CIRCUS rhythm using *apoyando* strokes. I teach *tirando* strokes before *apoyando* because the children find it easier to maintain a good hand position while making *tirando* strokes.

In addition to watching other children having lessons, the child of course watches his mother having a lesson and so has a much better idea of correct posture, etc, than would otherwise be the case. They also hear what is going on even when they do not seem to be listening while they play with bricks or cars or something. Little children want to copy their parents, so watching their mother or father having a lesson is very motivating for them. It is also very good for the parent to find out how difficult it is to play. It makes them much more sympathetic to their child when he has a problem.

I prefer the new child to observe lessons for at least half a term before starting his own lessons.

Among other materials I use the American Suzuki Guitar Book and tape, and I ask the parent to buy the tape as soon as possible and play it to her child every day so that they become familiar with the rhythms and melodies they will be learning. I ask them to play it as background music while they are doing other things – for instance, driving in the car, during meals, in the bath, or perhaps at bed time.

I have adopted the Suzuki idea of bowing at the beginning and end of each lesson. Bowing signifies a readiness on the part of the child to accept instruction, and also signifies mutual respect. I encourage the child to tell me all his exciting news before the first bow. Bowing at the end of the lesson gives a definite finish to the lesson so that the child then feels free to run about while his mother talks to me.

Finding a suitable instrument has been a problem, but the situation is now improving. The smallest guitars I have found so far are made in China. They are called Skylark Brand and are distributed by Hohner. They are obtainable from John Lewis Toy Department and also from Toys R Us at a cost of around £20.

It is also important for the child to have something suitable to sit on and to use as a footstool. I favour round milking stools. These are actually too high for my youngest pupil who is only 3, and he uses a fishing stool which is only 9½ in high. A small tin makes a good footstool.

The first lesson will be 10 or 15 minutes long, depending on the age of the child and his ability to concentrate. I am going to tell you how I go about teaching a three year old. Progress at this age is *very, very slow* and I am not looking for quick results. I want each tiny step to be thoroughly understood and reasonably well mastered before I go on to the next one.

After bowing, the first thing I teach is how to hold the guitar correctly. I put a white sticker on the guitar to help the child find the correct position for his right arm. Sometimes I make a mark on his arm with a felt tip pen or occasionally I stick a piece of elastoplast on the place so that he covers the sticker with the correct part of his arm. After moving his body, feet and arms into the appropriate positions, telling him what I am doing as I am placing his limbs, I place his thumb gently on string 6 over the middle of the sound hole, and his *i*, *m* and *a* fingers on strings 3, 2, and 1. I call this *prepare position*. When I have finished I ask his mother to admire his beautiful posture. Within a few seconds something will have moved, so at this point I ask him to give me his guitar, stand up and then run to the other side of the room and back. Then we do it all over again.

When I think there is a reasonable chance of success I ask the parent to help the child find *prepare position* while I turn my back. With my back still turned I say things like, 'I wonder if he has his left foot on the footstool? I wonder if the guitar is upright? I wonder if he is covering his white mark?' When I turn round to see what they have done I am lavish with my praise for every small thing correctly done, and award a MATCHSTICK POINT for each one. Every child I have ever taught absolutely adores winning matchsticks. I award matchsticks for *everything*, including good behaviour, not to mention *not* falling off the stool. Harry, aged five, does this approximately three times a lesson. If the child is still receptive, I teach him how to play string 6 with his thumb. I ask him to rest his *i*, *m* and *a* fingers on strings 3, 2 and 1 and to LIFT his thumb. His thumb is a HELICOPTER hovering over string 6. Next I show him the movement with my own thumb in the air. Now I guide his thumb to make the correct movement, asking him to brush the side of his *i* finger with the inside of his thumb as it makes the circular movement. He earns a matchstick for every correct thumb stroke.

The next game we play is to build a tower with my NESTING POTS. I add a pot to the tower every time he plays string 6 with a good thumb stroke, and when he reaches the top with the tenth pot, I put something nice inside the top one. This can be a Hula-Hoop, a raisin, a Smartie, a pretty sticker or a piece of fresh fruit.

At the end of his first lesson I introduce the child and his parent to my NOTE JUMPING STAVE of black tapes laid out on the floor. I teach them that B is on the middle line. Then I line them up at the other end of the room and shout 'B!!!', whereupon they are supposed to rush up to the stave and jump on to the middle line. After several turns both together. I ask the mother to do it by herself. Then I ask the child if he can find the B all by himself. Some children are very quick about this, but others are quite slow. If the child is one of the slow ones, you keep helping him until he gets it right. Of course, every time he lands on B he wins a matchstick

After his bow at the end of the lessons, the child has a wonderful time counting the matchsticks. I ask the parent to practise what we have done in the lesson for about five minutes several times a day.

In the **second lesson**, after dealing with posture and thumb strokes, I introduce the names of the right-hand fingers by writing *p*, *i*, *m* and *a* on the tips of the child's fingers and thumb. We then play games of identification using everybody's fingers, with matchstick points for correct answers of course.

At this point I also teach the numbers of the strings and sometimes put number stickers just below the bridge. I believe in making things as easy as possible, and avoiding mistakes at home.

I am now ready to teach him to play string 3 with a *tirando* stroke with his *i* finger. After finding *prepare position* I ask the child to lift his fingers just a tiny bit so that they are all hovering like HELICOPTERS above the strings. I call this *ready position*. Then, using the child's *i* finger, I gently pluck string 3 several times. Then the child has a turn by himself. We build another pile of ten pots. Each correct *tirando* stroke earns a matchstick point.

Next we do more NOTE JUMPING. If the child really does know where B is on my floor stave I teach him A in the *spAce*. This time, after finding the note with his mother and by himself, I give him some soft toys to put on A. The next stage is to mix up A and B. After an energetic session of NOTE JUMPING, the child is usually quite tired, so he is happy to look at my large flash card showing a CROTCHET and learn that it says TAA. Some children are ready to learn that two quavers joined together say TE TE, but if I think the child has had enough, this waits for the next lesson.

After the final bow, the child again has lots of fun counting the matchsticks while I make sure the mother knows what to practise at home.

In the **third lesson**, after dealing with posture, thumb strokes and *tirando* strokes with the *i* finger, I show the child how to make *tirando* strokes with his *m* finger.

We do more note jumping with B and A and then I introduce the child to my MAGNETIC BOARD so that this time he has to identify if the magnet is on A or B.

Next we do more games with the CROTCHET and QUAVER flash cards. For instance, I place four flash cards on the floor, three saying TAA and one saying TE TE. Then I clap the rhythm. Next I ask the mother to clap the rhythm. Then I help the child to clap the rhythm.

If he is brave enough, he tries to do it all by himself; if not, his mother helps him. Sometimes I rearrange the cards, depending how well the child is concentrating, and see if he can clap the new rhythm after going through the stages I mentioned before.

In another game, I start with just one flash card, and add a new TAA, or TE TE each time, clapping each group until there is a row of six cards.

In the **fourth lesson**, after dealing with posture, thumb strokes and *tirando* strokes with *i* and *m* fingers, I show the child how to make *tirando* strokes with his *a* finger.

We play lots more games with B and A, including note-jumping, games with the MAGNETIC BOARD and a game where I hide flashcards of the notes B and A behind my back and see if he can recognise them like this. Of course, he earns lots of matchsticks playing these games. If he

is still receptive, we do more games with the CROTCHETS and QUAVERS, clapping TAAS and TES, and if he is ready I teach him that a crotchet rest says SSH.

In the **fifth lesson** after covering all the material learnt so far I teach him how to play one thumb stroke on string 6, immediately followed by a *tirando* stroke with his *i* finger on string 3.

I continue to play lots of games with B and A, and use the FLASH CARDS with combinations of crotchets, quavers and crotchet rests for the CLAPPING GAMES. If the child is ready, and wants to learn another note for the note-jumping game to make it more exciting, I teach him G.

The new material for **lesson six** is to play one thumb stroke, immediately followed by a *tirando* stroke with *i* on string 3. and then a *tirando* stroke with *m* on string 2.

The next stage is to start work with the left hand. Before I ask the child to do anything on the guitar, I introduce him to a game I call 'Woodpeckers'.

First I write the numbers of each finger on the appropriate fingertip. Next, I put coloured dots, using felt tip pens, on the back of his right hand on the edge underneath the pinky finger; this is to represent bird seed. Next I draw a little red beak on the tip of each little 'woodpecker finger', calling them Mr 1, Mr 2, Mr 3 and Mr 4. Each little woodpecker then has a turn pecking up the bird seed. If possible, I ask the little woodpeckers to peck in time to the PICCADILLY CIRCUS rhythm while I sing the tune of TWINKLE and tap with my own woodpecker fingers.

The new material for **lesson seven** is to play one thumb stroke on string 6 immediately followed by *i* on string 3, *m* on string 2 and *a* on string 1. When the child can do this, he has reached a very important point, because he is now on the brink of being able to accompany simple songs with an E minor chord.

At this point I teach them the letter names of the strings they can play, and I usually put stickers for the letter names just below the bridge.

If he is receptive, and really knows all the signs that he has learnt so far, I teach him that a minim says TAA-AA.

I spend a lot of time consolidating the notes G, A and B with the usual games and matchstick points. The new material for **lesson eight** is to play *p i m a* with *tirando* strokes on the E minor chord, twice in a row without a break, then three times in a row, four times in a row and finally six times in a row. When he can do this he is ready to accompany me while I sing *Ah! Poor Bird*.

This is very exciting for everybody and a really important achievement. If the mother is willing, I teach her to sing the song, so that she can sing it for her child at home. The song is rather high so I don't ask the child to do this. (Having said this, some children just sing it themselves anyway.)

Throughout all of this time, I continually stress the importance of listening to the Suzuki tape because the Piccadilly Circus rhythm and *apoyando* strokes on the open strings are coming next

The new material for **lesson nine** is all about making *apoyando* strokes. When I teach *apoyando* strokes for the first time, I begin by demonstrating on the child's guitar with my fingers pretending to be his fingers on the top E string, so that he can see clearly what he is supposed to do.

Next, I ask him to test his thumb on string 6 while I guide his *i* finger to make the correct movement. Then I ask him to try to do it himself, keeping his hand and arm still and letting the finger do all the work. He earns a matchstick point for each correct movement. We then do the same thing with his *m* finger. Finally, I ask him to play first *i*, then *m*, and we build a tower of pots with each pair.

The Piccadilly Circus rhythm is familiar to the child because he has been listening to it on the tape for weeks. At this point, I show the mother a clapping game whereby we both clap our own hands while saying PICCADILLY, but clap each other's hands on the word CIRCUS. Next, I guide the child's hands so that he can play the game with his mother.

If I think he can cope, I ask him to see if he can play just PICCADILLY with *i m i m* on the E string.

A new game I introduce around this time is called 'Stations'. I arrange flash cards, of a crotchet, minim, crotchet rest and quavers at strategic points around the room. Then I ask the child to pretend to be a STEAM ENGINE with a CHUFF CHUFF train noise crawling round the room on his hands and knees. Next, I tell the train to stop at a particular station, for instance the TE-TE station, and make a WHISTLE, when the train has arrived. If he whistles and stops at the correct station, he wins a matchstick. This game can also be played on a 'sit-and-ride' toy or a tricycle.

A less energetic version of this game is the 'Tube Train Game', which needs a full tube of Smarties. For this game, I arrange a line of FLASH CARDS on the floor. Notes and signs can all be mixed together.

The child has to drive the TUBE TRAIN past each station, identifying it as he goes by, then at the last station some passengers (Smarties) get out of the train and find their way into the child's mouth.

Next I return to *tirando* strokes with the song *Ah! Poor Bird*. Some children find it difficult to come in at the right moment after being counted in. To help with this, I ask the child to simply play the very first note (E on string 6) while I say: 1, 2 READY PLAY NOW. If the child plays string 6 at the same time as I say NOW, he wins his matchstick point. If the child finds it relatively easy to keep in time while I sing *Ah! Poor Bird*, I start the child on *Land of the Silver Birch*, which needs the same *p i m a* accompaniment.

If everything is going well, and the child has practised clapping the Piccadilly Circus rhythm, and also playing just Piccadilly with his *i* and *m* fingers, he is often able to play the Piccadilly Circus rhythm straight away on the E string. I ask the child to practise playing the Piccadilly Circus rhythm up to four times in a row.

Next we play the 'Woodpecker' game in preparation for finding a single note with the left hand.

At this point, I put two stickers on the guitar; a star for G# and the letter name A for A on string 3. Now I put the child's guitar down on the floor, rather like a double bass, and show him how to put Mr 2's Red Beak on top of the A sticker. Then we do the same thing with Mr 1's Red Beak on top of the G sharp star. I do *not* want him to try and play string 3 at this stage, only to get used to finding A and G sharp, and putting his fingers down on the Red Beak tips.

In the NOTE JUMPING GAME, if he is ready to learn a new note, I teach him C in the space above the middle line.

As soon as I think the child is ready, I give him a copy of his special Reading Book. I use Margot Fagan's Recorder Course, Stage 1, called 'Play Time'. The notes are enormous, with nice simple rhythms on single notes, just B or A to begin with. Then there are seven tunes using only B, A and G with a variety of interesting rhythms. To begin with, I show the child how to speak the rhythm; then how to clap the rhythm while I speak, and finally, to do both together. I don't ask him to play any of these tunes until he can play *apoyando* strokes on the E, B and G strings really easily.

When the child can find A and G# on string 3 with the guitar resting on the ground, the next step is to see if he can keep the finger in the right place while I gently put the guitar in playing position. I make a game of it, saying 'Is it still there? Is it still there? Is it still there?' all the time I am moving the guitar. (This is of course only a temporary measure lasting about a week.) Next I show him that, if his left hand is in the correct place, there is enough space for my PENCIL MOUSE to play the MOUSEHOLE GAME. The MOUSE goes through the hole between the inside of his finger and the neck and fingerboard of the guitar making a suitable loud SQUEAKY NOISE.

Next I ask him to press his finger until the nail goes white, while I gently play string 3 for him. Many small children don't use enough muscle tone to make a clear note. Then he tries for himself. I always admire the beautiful 'tram line' that the string has made on his finger. The children usually complain that it is painful. When this happens, I tell them to shake their hand out, and then only practise putting the finger down for the length of time it takes to count 1, 2, 3 fairly fast. I ask the mother to gradually increase the time the finger is down until the child can hold it down for ten counts during his practice at home.

I find it helps a lot to *depersonalise* this sort of activity, so that it is not the child having a problem, it is Mr 1 who is not feeling strong today. A little bit of special attention, like stroking finger and then tapping it with my MAGIC WAND pencil while saying something like: 'ABRACADABRA - Let Mr 1 become very very STRONG!!!', often works wonders. Children have lots of imagination which can be very useful.

Lavish praise and lots of matchstick points to help him through any uncomfortable moments are essential.

Next, I show him that I need to put Mr 1 on G# star to make a very simple E major chord to play the accompaniment for *I Hear Thunder*, which is the *Frère Jacques* tune with the words a lot of children learn at Playgroup. The right hand plays strings 6, 3, 2 and 1 with *p*, *i*, *m* and *a*, so this follows neatly on from *Ah! Poor Bird* and *Land of the Silver Birch*. This is the first song I ask the children to try and sing for themselves, partly because they have probably sung it already at playgroup and partly because it doesn't go too high. I think it is a good introduction to playing and singing together which I think is a useful skill.

I always make sure that we do an equal amount of *apoyando* playing during the lesson. When the child can play Piccadilly Circus nicely on the E string, I show him, on his own guitar, how to play it on the B string. This is usually quite difficult for him, and he will probably need to spend a week on this before moving on to playing Piccadilly Circus on the G string.

I try to stop an activity before a child shows signs of having had enough, and change to a musical game of some sort. The most recent addition to my repertoire of teaching games is the new game for learning the proper names for musical signs. This game is a TREASURE TRAIL com-

plete with model ships to be made with card and sequins for TREASURE. The treasure is earned by correctly naming the various signs: treble clef, crotchet, stave, barlines, etc. The children absolutely love it, and it works particularly well in group lessons.

Going back to *apoyando* strokes, the next important step for the child is to be able to cross from playing Piccadilly Circus on the E string to playing it on the B string. Then we do it the other way round. Next I ask him to play it on the B string and then cross to the G string. Then we do that the other way around as well. Now he is ready to try crossing from E to B to G and back again to B. Finally I ask him to cross from G to B to E and back again to B. At this point I show the child and his mother that he has actually played Ex. 1 from the Suzuki Guitar Book.

Because of all the games we have done with G, A and B during NOTE JUMPING, the MAGNETIC BOARD, and games with the flash cards, they can that recognise the Gs and the Bs and the TE TES. I explain that the SEMIQUAVERS say TIRI-TIRI, and that the rhythm TIRI-TIRI TE TE is the Piccadilly Circus rhythm.

The next important step is the introduction to the Reading Book, but this time to *play the notes*, not just clap and speak the rhythms. The children are absolutely thrilled with themselves when they play *Busy Bee* from the music the very first time. When the child plays *Busy Bee* at home during his practice, I ask the mother to draw a star on the page. When a child can play a piece without error or hesitation, I award him a DOTTED STAR for that piece.

If a child is finding it tiring to make notes with his left hand, I like to give him something new to do with his right so I show him how to make a BABY CHORD by playing B and G together with his *m* and *i* fingers. When he can do this, I play him the song *My Paddle's Keen and Bright* using a thumb stroke on string 6 followed by the baby chord with *i* and *m* together. Then it is his turn. Only when he is playing this really confidently, usually after a couple of weeks, do I introduce the big chord with *i* on string 3, *m* on string 2, and *a* on string 1.

The next big milestone is learning the First Variation of Twinkle with the Piccadilly Circus rhythm. Piccadilly Circus Twinkle has three neat sections which I call the *bread*, the *butter* and the *cheese*. The *bread* section is the easiest because it only needs one finger, Mr 3, to play D on string 2, and the other notes are open strings. Open G, D with Mr 3, Open E, then D with Mr 3 again.

When teaching the *bread* section, I build up the skill gradually:

- step 1 is to play Piccadilly Circus on the Open G string
- step 2 is to play Piccadilly Circus on the G, followed by Piccadilly Circus on the D. (I put a letter name sticker on the D)
- step 3 is to play Piccadilly Circus on the G, followed by the D and then the Open E
- step 4 is to play Piccadilly Circus on the G, followed by the D, then the E and finally the D again

So that the mother can help the child at home, I write out each letter name on a separate piece of card. I have also colour coded the notes needed for each section: red for the *bread* letter names, blue for the *butter* letter names and green for the *cheese* letter names. The *butter* section is harder because it needs two fingers of the left hand, but fortunately, these are separated by open strings.

BUTTER

C 1 on string 2

B open string 2

A 2 on string 3

G open string 3

(I put a letter name sticker on C.)

The *cheese* section is the hardest of all because it needs three fingers:

CHEESE

D 3 on string 2

C 1 on string 2

B open string 2

A 2 on string 3

When the children are able to play *Twinkle* all the way through, we play a lovely game in the group lessons to help the children remember that the cheese section is repeated. We play the second slice of cheese *softly*, as an echo. I send one child to sit outside the open door of the room ready to play the *soft cheese* all by himself, and the rest of the class play everything else. They have to remember *not* to play while the child outside the door plays the echo.

By the time every child has had a turn being the echo we have done a lot of *Twinkle* practice!

Now I simply must tell you about the best idea I ever had to motivate the children to practise at home. This was to award ATTRACTIVE ACHIEVEMENT RIBBONS to hang on their guitars. The children earn ribbons for everything I want them to learn.

Usually the first ribbon they earn is the PRELIMINARY SONGS ribbon. This is what they have to do:

- the player should choose three songs and be able to play the accompaniment.
- the player must come in correctly and keep time all the way through the three songs.

For some children, the second ribbon they earn is the PRE-TWINKLE PICCADILLY CIRCUS rhythm ribbon.

This is what they have to do:

- the player should use *apoyando* strokes with *i* and *m* fingers on the open G string only.
- the player must come in correctly and keep good time all the way through the first variation of *Twinkle* (24 repetitions).
- the speed should be appropriate to the player's age and ability.

Other children win the RHYTHM LEVEL 1 ribbon next. This is what they have to do:

- crotchets, minims, crotchet rests, quavers
- the player must CLAP the rhythm and SPEAK the Kodály Rhythm Syllables of the Level 1 MUSICAL SQUARES GAME all the way through without hesitation or error. The metronome should be set at a suitable speed for the age and experience of the player.

I would like to finish with some miscellaneous useful ideas.

The first one is the POLICEMAN MATCHSTICK WITH BLU-TACK to encourage a high wrist. It sticks onto the soundboard under the wrist.

The next idea for the more advanced children is to colour code the positions on the guitar, with a line in that colour under the relevant bit of music.

Pale Blue for 2nd position

Red 3

Yellow 4

Purple 5

Brown 6

Green 7

Pink 8

Dark Blue 9

Orange 10

Black 11

Something else I have found invaluable is to enlarge the music. The younger the child the LARGER the music needs to be.

Cutting up the music into *small, manageable sections* for difficult pieces is another idea.

The TREASURE TRAIL game for teaching musical signs up to Grade 5, including ornaments, is a big success, and we did it as a very successful side-show at my daughter's school May Fair, May '94. The MUSICAL SQUARES GAMES FOR PITCH AND RHYTHM are always fun to do, especially in a group. LITTLE GREY RABBIT'S MUSIC PRACTICE GAME helps inspire the children to practise at home. SCALE CARD SORTING (putting the letter names in the correct order) is a lovely game for group lessons which even older children of seven find quite difficult. Copies of all these games are available.

Throwing matchsticks on the ground while a child is playing, every time he remembers a special teaching point is another popular game. A group lesson game is HUNT THE THIMBLE TWINKLE for dynamics which can also be done with loud and soft clapping.

FOLLOW MY LEADER GAMES with *p*, *i*, *m* and *a tirando* strokes, or Piccadilly Circus rhythm, work very well in the groups, and teach the children to be alert as well as coming in time.

The TRUTH GAME is great fun. The children have to STOP playing if they make a mistake. We see who is left in last.

I often run PRACTICE STAR COMPETITIONS to encourage home practice. The person with the most stars from one group lesson to the next win a small prize, like Bubble Mixture, or a Mars Bar.

For the NOTE JUMPING GAME, I find funny names for the notes to help fix the notes in the children's minds – for instance:

Fox's F in the bottom space

Eel E

Giraffe G

Aeroplane A

Celestial C
Dripping Down D

I hope that gives you some ideas!

The Appendix shows *Ah! Poor Bird* and *Land of the Silver Birch*.

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p i m a

Land of the silver birch

p i m a

home of the beaver

p i m a

Where still the mighty moose

p i m a

wanders at will



Land of the sil - ver birch, home of the bea - ver,



Where still the migh - ty moose wan - ders at will. Blue lake and rock - y shore, -



I will re - turn once more, Hi ya ha Hi ya Hi ya ha Hi ya Hi ya ha Hi ya Ha!