

How to Choose Which Instrument to Learn

By Katherine Baird

When I was the director of a community music school in northern California, I often had parents who wanted to sign their child up for music lessons, ask me how to choose an instrument. Sometimes the child had adamantly announced they wanted violin or piano or cello, etc. Other times parents could see musical interest in their kid but didn't know which direction to go.

There are several factors to consider when deciding on an instrument. Depending on the age of the student, size matters. Generally, children need to be a certain size and/or age before learning an instrument such as clarinet, oboe, saxophone, brass instruments, as well as formal voice instruction. If your child is really excited about any of those, contact teachers who teach them and see if your child is age and size- ready.

I think a student will be most successful playing an instrument to which they personally gravitate. I believe we all have an affinity for certain sounds and instruments, so go with that if possible. Often, there may be a piano in the house, and so a parent decides that's the best choice. (My father, a musician, firmly believed that all musicians should begin with piano for a foundation and then add another instrument as desired - string, wind, voice). While I agree the piano does form a solid foundation for building musicianship, understanding intervallic relationships and the like, playing any musical instrument provides all the wonderful benefits of a vibrant and magical music education.

I suggest to parents that they play lots of different music for their child, including high quality examples of other children playing. There are many great examples of violin, cello, viola (often overlooked because of its similarity to violin), guitar, and harp, as well as piano. Take them to concerts where they can see and hear live performances. Orchestra concerts as well as community music school performances are wonderful resources. Some programs offer "instrument petting zoos" where children can handle instruments and learn more about them up close.

Stringed instruments are very accessible to young students, thanks largely to the Suzuki method, which approaches learning from an age-appropriate angle, with fractional sized instruments readily available. When playing a stringed instrument, students must develop their ear from the beginning, learning how to adjust pitch and also finesse the sound with the right hand in bowing. Stringed instruments are very complex but utterly within reach of a young child.

It is fascinating to discover which instrument resonates (no pun intended) with your child, and a fun journey to explore together!