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Once you and your child have decided that it's time to begin music lessons, and have chosen which instrument they will learn, it's time to find a teacher. This is a task which is extremely important to get right. The teacher-pupil relationship is sensitive, and the kind of experiences your child has with their first teacher may determine their attitude towards music for their whole life. Our guide can help you and your child to clarify what you want to get out of music lessons, and suggests questions to ask when choosing a teacher.

# CHOOSING *an* INSTRUMENTAL TEACHER

## A big decision

Once you and your child are sure that they're ready to begin learning an instrument, and have given consideration to the instrument they may be best suited to (see our article, [Choosing an Instrument for Your Child](#)), it's time to look for a teacher. This is a task which can seem straightforward on the face of it, especially if you've decided your child should take lessons through their school or local music service, where they are allocated a teacher from a bank of peripatetic staff. It's not always that easy, however, if for instance you prefer to look for a private teacher, or if your child wishes to take up a non-mainstream instrument.

*Choosing* a teacher is very different to *finding* a teacher. Finding a teacher may just involve an internet search for musicians in your area, or responding to an advert in your local newspaper. You could also talk to your child's classroom teacher or school office to find out if there are music lessons available through the school. Finding the *right* teacher, however, can be more complicated: what makes a good teacher for one person may make them completely unsuitable for another, and it's discovering the qualities in the right teacher for your child which can take the time, but which is essential in achieving a good teacher-pupil relationship.

Choosing the right person to teach your child as they embark on their musical studies is of immense importance, and often can mean the difference between a child giving up after just a few months of lessons, or being inspired to make their music learning into a lifelong journey. That's not to say that learning with a teacher arranged through a school, or in group lessons, isn't the best thing to do—it may well be—but it is not the only option, and it may be wise to consider all avenues before simply committing to the most straightforward approach.

In some cases, the fact that lessons on popular instruments, such as flute or guitar, for example, are offered in school will be an influencing factor in your choice of instrument. Hand in hand with this, is the advantage that school lessons are usually cheaper than those arranged with a private teacher, and there is sometimes help available for purchasing or loaning an instrument. Financial considerations will always play a part in your decisions about which instrument to study as well as which teacher to study with, but with careful research they need not limit your options.

Before deciding on a teacher, insist on a trial lesson, and stay with your child so you can see how it goes; you are under no obligation to book further sessions if you don't feel that the teacher is a good match and if you don't sense a good chemistry between them. You might also get the opportunity to attend a recital or an end of term concert where the teacher's existing pupils are performing. These are great chances to see not only the standard of musicianship the teacher achieves, but also the kind of repertoire they choose to perform, and how they conduct themselves in front of an audience.

## What makes a good teacher?

The qualities that make a person a good teacher will not necessarily mean that they are the right teacher for every pupil. Their personality and method of teaching will make

them a match for some students, but not others. If you can, even before embarking on your search for a teacher, try and take note of how your child responds best to people: do they react well to being told firmly what to do, or do they prefer to work things out for themselves with a little guidance? Do they become upset when criticised, or do they respond well to feedback? A very sensitive child, for example, may be upset or even frightened if they're told they haven't practised enough, or that they aren't quite up to performing standard, but another child may thrive under a reasonably 'strict' teacher, and achieve all the more thanks to high expectations.

Talk to potential teachers about their teaching style. It is vital to get the teacher-pupil relationship right to help your child enjoy their lessons at the same time as progressing musically. Ideally, a teacher should be able to put a child at ease so that they feel confident in lessons, happy to demonstrate their abilities and unafraid to ask for help. Equally, a teacher who never criticises or pushes their pupils is not always a good thing, as the child may become complacent, feel that lessons are not to be taken seriously, or there is no need to practice.

Some teachers become known and respected for teaching pupils who go on to become professional musicians or performers in their own right. This doesn't necessarily mean, however, that these teachers are the best for *your* child, who is just starting out. The ideal person to teach a young child in their first few years of learning is someone who has plenty of experience working with children, who is able to teach them how to enjoy their instrument and respect it at the same time, who will instil good technique and posture from the very beginning, but who will, most importantly, inspire a child to invest their time and attention in making music.

## Lessons at school or through Music Services

If your child's school offers free or subsidised instrumental lessons, you're in an excellent position for them to begin learning an instrument with the support of their classroom teacher, within an environment with which they're already familiar. Children may feel encouraged by the fact that some of their friends may also take up the opportunity to learn the same instrument, and they will likely have access to a number of group playing opportunities, such as beginner orchestras or concert bands.

Often, when lessons are arranged through school, you have the option of individual sessions, usually twenty minutes or half an hour in length initially, or group lessons with two or three other children. A child who is picking up an instrument for the first time may benefit from having their peers in the class learning alongside them. The downside of this can be that sometimes in group lessons everyone learns at the pace of the slowest pupil, but a good teacher should make efforts to group pupils based on their ability. If your child responds well to makes good progress in their lessons, it's probably better for them to have individual lessons for the longer term, so that they have the full attention of the teacher and are neither hindered nor overshadowed by the differing abilities of others.

In the UK, most counties or boroughs will have a Music



Service, an organisation which is run by the Local Education Authority. The aim of Music Services is to assist and advise schools with their music education provision and to provide opportunities for children to play in ensembles and to perform from an early stage. Some Music Services may also have an instrument loan service, with discounts or free provision for those on low incomes, and provide access to large scale and high quality music experiences for pupils, working with professional musicians and venues.

Peripatetic music teachers who have contracts with schools or Music Services will have been through several rounds of rigorous interviews, checks and observations in order to get their job. You can be reasonably confident that they have the relevant qualifications and experience in their field and that they are used to working with children, however of course a good chemistry between teacher and pupil cannot be defined in such a precise way, so you still need to take care and make sure that the teacher is a good match for your child. On the whole, these practical assurances of teaching standards are not so easily obtained when you engage a private teacher, so a little extra research is required.

### **Privately arranged lessons**

Finding a private instrumental teacher involves more work than finding lessons through a school, but you may experience a more satisfactory outcome this way. Reasons for engaging a private teacher may be as simple as lessons on your child's chosen instrument not being available through school tuition, or you might prefer for your child to have lessons outside of school time. You're certainly able to be more particular when choosing a private teacher, providing that there are a number of teachers practising in your area from whom to choose. One of the most important things to do when looking for a teacher is to get recommendations. Ask friends, acquaintances, other parents at the school gates, if they know of a good teacher who might be suitable. This may give you a starting point when doing your research, but if you don't manage to get a recommendation this way, there are a number of excellent websites listing qualified teachers by instrument and geographical area (see the Further Reading section), so you could look online to get a list of potential teachers too.

Anyone teaching a musical instrument should be properly qualified to do so, which in most cases will mean that they need to be highly proficient on the instrument themselves, and have a teaching qualification. Use your judgement on this, however; there are lots of very experienced teachers, particularly in 'non-classical' instruments such as guitar, who may not have academic qualifications, but certainly have the skills and experience to teach your child to play to a high standard. At [babymusic.com](http://babymusic.com) we would recommend that your child study with a teacher who is able to teach them to read sheet music, and incorporate an element of musical theory and sight-reading into their lessons, as this will best prepare them if they choose to study music at a higher level, or if they wish to take performance exams. It will depend on you and your child, though, along with the instrument they have chosen and what you both hope to gain from them learning to play.

Studying with a private teacher is likely to be more expensive than having lessons at school, as the lessons will not be subsidised and the teacher will need to cover their own overheads including a teaching room or studio, and insurance. You should also find out whether sheet music is provided or needs to be paid for separately, and whether you will also need to pay an accompanist if one is needed for an exam or performance. You may save money by engaging a university student, an unqualified teacher or someone who is just starting out in teaching, but be aware when doing this that someone who is not qualified or experienced in teaching may not necessarily be the best person to work with an absolute beginner. The playing techniques, posture and habits formed when a child begins to learn can become ingrained very quickly, and poor technique can be extremely difficult to correct later in life if they are not taught correctly from the very beginning. Although it can be good to save money and support someone new to their teaching career, make sure that they are capable of providing a quality start; this means more than just being very good at playing the instrument themselves.

### **Things to consider.**

Here is a list of points to think about when choosing an instrumental teacher. Some of these will be more relevant to you than others, but all are worth bearing in mind so that you make an informed decision. Further questions and discussion points are available in articles featured in the Further Reading section.

#### **Practical/Financial**

- How much do lessons cost and do you save money by paying for a block of lessons in advance?
- Will you be responsible for buying sheet music?
- Are you able to get any financial help with buying or loaning an instrument?
- Where are lessons held and is it easy for you to get to with your child?
- What is the policy if a lesson is missed through child illness or other unforeseen circumstance?
- How much involvement is expected from parents?

#### **Musical/Educational**

- What style of music is taught? Is study focused solely on classical music, for example, or will the student experience a variety of styles?
- Will the pupil be able to play music that they have chosen themselves?
- Will they be taught how to read music, and some musical theory alongside their playing?
- Does the teacher encourage children to take performance exams?
- Are there any opportunities to play with others—bands or orchestras for example?
- Are there opportunities to perform in front of an audience?
- How much practice is expected from pupils?

## Further Reading

### Online Articles

#### [Choices When Choosing Music Teachers](#)

Cambridgeshire Music Service offers some pointers on what to expect from a music teacher, and the variations when choosing private tuition or going through a music school or other service.

#### [Choosing a Music Teacher](#)

The website of the Music Teachers National Association in America offers some advice on how to choose a teacher, including important questions to ask.

#### [Choosing the Right Music Teacher](#)

This family-oriented website provides some useful tips for deciding what makes a good teacher for your child, as what suits one family will vary from what suits another.

#### [Essential Characteristics For a Music Teacher](#)

Nancy Shankman from New York University talks about what traits music teachers must have in order to be successful in their careers.

#### [How to Choose a Good Music Teacher](#)

This page asks some thought-provoking questions of those considering music lessons, which haven't necessarily been covered by other sites.

#### [How to Choose a Music Teacher](#)

This document from the Wisconsin Music Teachers Association gives pointers and a handy checklist of questions you might ask a potential teacher before you decide whether to enrol with them.

#### [How to Choose a Music Teacher](#)

Tips for finding a suitable teacher, focusing on ensuring that professional qualifications and child protection requirements have been fulfilled.

#### [How to Choose a Music Teacher](#)

The story of a musician whose playing suffered at the hands of a bad teacher, with some lessons to learn from this.

#### [How to Choose a Music Teacher](#)

The website of a UK piano teacher, on which he offers his experience of how to choose the right teacher for your child, how a pupil-teacher relationship develops, and what to do if it doesn't work out.

#### [How to Choose a Music Teacher](#)

This fascinating blog post talks mainly about the different types of teachers, and how they are suited to various different types of students. From absolute beginners to professional musicians, we all need support and guidance from a teacher or mentor, and this post helps to match your needs to the kind of teacher you should look for.

#### [How To Choose a Music Teacher/Studio](#)

Concise but comprehensive. Key questions that a parent should ask.

#### [How To Choose The Best Possible Music Teacher](#)

An interesting page which explores people's differing expectations and what they hope to gain from music lessons, along with various styles of learning. This provides much more than just what to look for in a good teacher, and is well worth reading.

#### [How to: Choose the Perfect Music Teacher](#)

Author Nancy Harder gives the lowdown on what to consider when looking for the perfect music teacher, and why finding the right teacher for you is so important.

#### [How to Find and Choose a Musical Instrument Teacher](#)

A guide to help you make an informed decision when choosing a music teacher, including some commonly asked questions.

#### [How to Find and Select a Piano Teacher](#)

A comprehensive piece covering all the things you need to think about when choosing a teacher, whatever your level, but particularly aimed at students entering college education.

#### [How to Select a Music Teacher: A Letter to Parents](#)

This piece gives food for thought on a range of issues, from how to tell if your child is ready for music lessons, choosing an instrument, and finding a teacher.

#### [Picking the Right Music Teacher for Your Child](#)

An article provided by The National Association for Music Education, with a checklist of questions to ask and things to consider, along with a personal experience written by the mother of two daughters who both had childhood music lessons.

### Websites

#### [Majoring in Music](#)

An excellent website for anyone considering further education in music. This site contains well-written articles on all aspects of studying music at college or university, rather than beginners.