

# How to Choose a Piano Teacher

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As the contact for the Madison Area Piano Teachers Associated Referral service, I am regularly asked to help parents and adult students sort through the various qualifications of the many independent piano teachers in the area. Since, the referral service functions simply as an objective list provided at no cost to prospective students, I stress that it is ultimately the parent's responsibility to interview a variety of teachers to find the best fit.

Yet, few people truly know how to locate the best piano teacher (or the best piano for that matter, but that's another article) and oftentimes rely on finding the most affordable teacher - or the one who lives nearest to their home. By all means, these two criteria are important; however, they should not be the only limiting factors that should be considered. Similarly, these should not be the most important criteria by which you decide who your child spends a half hour with on a weekly basis.

Other questions that should be asked are:

1. What is the teacher's educational background and teaching experience? Are you trained in a variety of methods and pedagogical approaches?
2. What length lessons are offered, and what is the cost? Will I be able to make monthly payments, or do you require pre-paid tuition by semester?
3. What type of piano do you teach on? Will the student be playing on a Steinway grand each week?
4. What are the teacher's studio policies? If summer lessons are required, will those lessons interfere with family obligations and vacations?
5. What is emphasized in teaching (music reading, creativity, theory, classics, popular, jazz)? Do you train the ear, or strictly emphasize reading music?
6. What age levels do you prefer? Will you take a 4 year old beginner? How many adult students do you currently teach?
7. What activities (group lessons, contests, festivals) and performance opportunities (recitals, piano play together, play-a-thons) do you offer your students?
8. What does the teacher offer that is different, or at least comparable, to another teacher? Are you a member of any professional organizations?

If your child is goal oriented and enjoys receiving prizes (such as stickers), you need to learn how a prospective piano teacher encourages, motivates, and rewards students. If the student is social and prefers to interact with others, group classes may be an important supplement to private instruction. If you are unable to afford regular lessons, or perhaps purchasing a piano is simply not within your financial means, you need to engage in a conversation with a prospective teacher regarding how to overcome these financial obstacles. Group classes are oftentimes a more economical way to facilitate piano study. Eventually, you should assume that each student will need private instruction; however, a group class may be an efficient way to assess a prospective student's level of interest, seriousness, and ability to commit to regular practice.

It may be easier to make the commitment to purchase a suitable piano and invest in regular lessons with a suitable instructor if you are confident that your child is serious about taking lessons, and that the teacher you have chosen is the best fit for your child's individual personality. Various teachers will offer a variety of responses to each of these questions. Engaging in meaningful conversations with more than one (perhaps a half dozen is ideal) prospective teachers will better help you decide whether or not the teacher living down the block who charges \$20 for a half hour lesson is in fact the best match for your child's unique interests. And, it is my personal opinion that "talent" is less important to a student's music education when you take the time to locate a suitable instructor.

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