



Playing It By Ear: Marilyn Lowe stresses that students should understand rhythm and music before learning to read notes.

88 Keys, Infinite Possibilities

Think your child might be inspired by music? Marilyn Lowe, a worldwide speaker and local piano instructor, uses a method that could get their creative juices flowing before they ever learn how to read music.

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There are many ways for music to flow through the brain, down the fingers and onto the 88 keys of a piano to soar around in the air and back into the brain. Some schools of thought will assert that reading music and methodically hitting precisely the right notes in precisely the right sequence is the best way to learn. Marilyn Lowe, a Springfieldian who gives talks worldwide and turns children into pianists, says some musical success stories begin more simply: With tiny little fists hitting the keys and tiny little ears listening to the sounds they make.

SPEAKING TO THE WORLD

Originally from Illinois, Marilyn Lowe was educated at Indiana University and has been teaching, learning and playing in churches ever since. In addition to the piano lessons she gives 417-land kids, Lowe travels around the country and the world for music-related speaking engagements. Lowe says her busy instruction schedule doesn't allow her much time for vacations, so she takes advantage of these appointments at workshops and conferences by adding a few days to her trip for sightseeing. Here are some of the places she's been to speak about children's music education:

- ♪ Lisbon and Aveiro, Portugal
- ♪ Hinterzarten and Breitnau, Germany
- ♪ Backwell, England
- ♪ Dumphries, Scotland
- ♪ Rome
- ♪ Toronto
- ♪ Las Vegas
- ♪ Los Angeles

Lowe teaches piano to 22 kids in Springfield and nine in Overland Park, Kansas. (That's where she travels regularly to instruct her grandchildren and the kids from another Kansas City-area family.) A 44-year veteran of piano instruction, she has also written her own series of keyboard games books that were the first to use the children's teaching methods developed by researcher Edwin E. Gordon.

Lowe says the older methods of teaching music to young children asked them to learn to read notation as a first step. She equates that to asking a baby to write before he learns to speak or understand language; it doesn't allow time to understand the foundations of music. And it makes sense, she says, to learn music the way we learn a language. "Children should learn tonal patterns and rhythm patterns and how to play and use their physical bodies at the keyboard first," she says. "That's the vocabulary. Then they can apply what they know to notation."

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GOT QUESTIONS?: ASK AN INSTRUCTOR

Q: If I have more than one child, can they take lessons together?

A: Ask your piano instructor if he or she will do that, but Lowe says she instructs groups often. "When the parents and the children are busy, sometimes it's more economical for the kids to come together," she says. Lowe says she'll have the students play keyboard games together, or work with one on the piano while another writes music on the computer.

Q: At what age should my child start taking lessons?

A: Lowe's keyboard games books are aimed at beginners who are 4 or 5 years old. She says it's helpful to begin laying the musical foundation at that age. The problem with beginning later is mostly scheduling conflicts. The older we are, she says, the busier we are. Lowe says she's been playing as long as she can remember.

Q: When can I expect my child to become adept at reading music?

A: It can happen very early, but there's a change when children reach a certain age, according to Lowe's experience. "Notation requires abstract thinking skills," she says. "Children are concrete thinkers until they about 10 or 11 years old. I see a change to really good readers at that point."

TO HELP KIDS LEARN THE BASICS OF MUSIC'S LANGUAGE, LOWE RECOMMENDS SOME PLAYING-WITH-MUSIC TIPS FOR PIANO BEGINNERS.

- **Work** in groups. The children learning together don't have to be the same age or even the same skill level.
- **Learn** music patterns by ear before attempting to play using notation.
- **Start** with exercises off the piano, then later bring what the child has learned to the piano.
- **Give** the child a rhythm pattern, then let him or her create music based on that.
- **Encourage** creativity, improvisation and imagination with the youngest of students. Make up stories, draw pictures, then make music based on those creative expressions.

There is notation in Lowe's keyboard games books to a certain degree, but it's not the notes you'd see in typical music. Instead, it's illustrations of children's hands on the piano, showing them where to put their fingers on the keys. It's a form of notation that she designed herself.

Why begin with nonstandard notation? Lowe says that around middle school, children develop a better capacity for reading music and don't need the nonstandard notation any longer.

But even then, she says, many of her students play by ear or read the music without even realizing they are doing it. By then, it has become second nature.

Music lessons in general, regardless of method and a child's aptitude for what's being taught, can be beneficial to a child's development.

"Research shows that music happens in all parts of the brain," Lowe says. "I've seen slides of people engaged in music where the brain just looks like a Christmas tree, all lit up."

Lowe also believes that music is a powerful human resource. "It's like a balm for healing when it's internalized," she says.

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