

Music and the Whole Child

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By Marvin Blickenstaff <http://www.pianopedagogy.org/music-and-the-whole-child/>

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Most children engage in some athletic activity, ranging a wide gamut from playground games to highly organized sports teams. We applaud the social development that results from playing together, sharing, and working towards a common goal. However, at the forefront of athletic activity is physical development. Most of us are far removed from the farm life where entire families work together, and physical exercise becomes a way of life. We seek an alternative, and we turn to sports for physical development. That is an important part of growing up.

Everyone attends school for the purpose of education and intellectual development. We pursue that to ever-higher levels, and some students pursue their education and attain masters and doctorate degrees. Intellectual development is a natural part of the human condition, and we strive to be life-long learners.

Physical development and intellectual growth: both very important aspects of growth and maturity.

So where do piano lessons fit into this scenario? Certainly piano lessons involve the physical and the intellectual. To play the piano well, one must have extremely highly developed physical skills. All of those five-finger patterns, scale studies, and broken chord drills are aimed at developing the physical skills necessary to play the piano well. And there is so much to learn about the construction of music, all the way from the relationship of tones (intervals) to the various ways in which composers organize the material. We can see readily that piano lessons combine the elements of physical and intellectual development.

But we humans are not just physical and intellectual beings. We have feelings and emotions. Psychologists tell us that the expression of emotions is a key ingredient to a healthy existence. Warped and challenged people are often those who have not learned how to express their feelings in a positive manner.

The unique thing about music lessons is the way in music study integrates the three areas which make us complete, healthy persons: the physical, the intellectual, and the emotional. The goal of a musical performance is to share feelings with the listener. To do that the performer must identify with the emotion of the piece and express it freely and convincingly. The goal of piano study is to bring the student to an understanding of the feelings expressed in each composition, to identify with that, and to share that with others.

Why piano lessons? To make each student a more complete, happy, and healthy young person by integrating the physical, the intellectual, and the emotional. When we weld together the three sides of that triangle through music study, we are forming the foundation for a wholesome, balanced person.

Marvin Blickenstaff has directed the Program for Excellence in Piano Study (PEPS) at the New School since 1999. Blickenstaff holds degrees from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Indiana University where he received both academic and performance honors. He is well-known across the country and in Canada for his frequent presentations at state and national conferences. The Marvin Blickenstaff Endowment Fund was established in his honor by the Music Teachers National Association Foundation. In 2007 the on-line journal Piano Pedagogy Forum published tributes to Blickenstaff, honoring his contribution to piano teaching in America. Also in 2007 he was named Fellow of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. He was honored in 2009 with MTNA's highest honor, the MTNA Achievement Award. Blickenstaff has served as chair of the piano departments at the University of North Carolina/ Chapel Hill and Goshen College (IN) and from 2000-2013 he was President of the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy.