

## Planning Piano Lessons for Your First Blind Student

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You have just gotten off the phone with a parent who will be bringing a child who is blind for piano lessons. You have heard of famous blind musicians, perhaps you have even been aware of an accomplished young person receiving a scholarship from an affiliate of a teacher's organization you belong to. Your common sense as a person and a teacher tells you that regardless of whether a child is sighted or blind, children are children. What you know about the piano and teaching and encouraging practice applies to everyone. You also know that as different as each sighted individual is from another, so, too, will all blind children have their individuality. You can look forward to being open and creative in finding best ways for working together. You think of the activities of a lesson-the scales, the books of pieces, etc. What can you expect-demand--to be the same? What will be different? Will you be able to teach all the music skills you normally do, or will you need help? Is there any danger of doing something so completely wrong that the damage will be irreparable?

The answer to this last question is, probably not. If you stick to the standards you have as a teacher, emphasize posture, proper fingering and playing habits, if you demand that everything is learned thoroughly and not played too fast or carelessly, and, most of all, if you build on the child's love of music and keep a pleasant atmosphere where he or she has an enjoyable time when with you, then whatever time you and the child spend will be time spent well.

This article will discuss preparing for the first day and beginning lessons after that. We'll then talk about ideas for directions you can go from there. We will MENTION some of the resources we have found most useful. Full details about those and additional ones are on this Vision Through Music web site's Resources page.

Please know that you do not need to feel alone with this. Even if you are out in the boondocks, as thankfully many of you are to reach children who happen to live out there too, you're just a phone call or e-mail away from someone with experience who can help you along.

For starts, you know that the child will be coming with someone. Treat the child-adult connection as you normally would. If it's a young child, perhaps you normally have the parent come into the inner sanctum for the first day. If the child is older and appears comfortable, you can, if it feels right to you, maintain the usual practice of letting the parent wait in the waiting area and start your exploring expedition. Be aware of sighted guide techniques. Normally, the blind child holds onto your elbow (or forearm if very small), and walks behind you. If there are tight squeezes, or a piano cover corner jutting out, you may have to do a bit more maneuvering, but if you explain what's in the way and why you need to help, the child should have no problem with that. This is normal in his or her world. If it seems appropriate, explain what your studio has in it and how it's decorated. If there is a fish tank, for example, the child may have already heard it and ask you what the sound is. There may be other instruments, or the metronome. Anything that seems particularly attractive might serve as a reward for exploring after the lesson.

These days, it seems more children may be a bit hyper or have shorter than expected attention spans. This could be normal, or a part of the syndrome that has caused the blindness, and the parent may have just not told you about it. Treat such things as you would a normal child. Even the wildest blind children I've met are aware that it's not a good idea to run around in places where they don't know what they could bump into, so you should have cooperation.

Things could be different if the child is extremely shy, but most likely, he will be proactive from the start. If he has a piano or keyboard at home, chances are that he will be eager to show you what he knows. But of course, this is where you take control. Ask some guiding questions-play me a high note, play me a low note. Do you know what an octave is? What are notes that sound good when played together, and which ones are the kinds that send your mom running in to tell you to stop fooling around?

Next will be positioning on the piano bench. You know how to teach that. Don't be afraid to touch the child or move his or her hands. Many students we see have poor posture at the instrument because the teacher was afraid to speak bluntly about it. Say what needs to be said. You may sometimes want to position the child's hands properly, or have him place his hands on top of yours. If you are going to touch or manipulate, give him some notice that you're coming. If you encounter some resistance, there's probably a concern that you can alleviate by

giving more verbal instructions. Blind children are generally more "talky" at an early age. They will appreciate having things explained thoroughly-unless they, like other children, are impatient and want to get to their agenda before yours. In that case, you know how to remind her who is who.

If there is a sibling in the family taking lessons, you may be surprised at what the child has picked up. She may already know the names of the notes and often, which is which by sound. Don't appear astonished at evidence of what could be perfect pitch, and don't be disappointed if the child doesn't know what you expect. Even if the child does have perfect pitch, that won't change anything in what he needs to learn now or later, or the method of teaching.

What about lesson books? If you are the kind of teacher who gives out a shiny pamphlet and notebook the first day and assigns page 3 for the next week, you will need to prepare yourself for working without a book, at least for a while. The braille music code is excellent for reading any type of music, and it would be a good thing indeed for your student to be able to transition to using it. However, in today's less than perfect world, now may not be the right time. Adults who attended schools for the blind more than fifty years ago remember being introduced to both the piano keys and the braille music symbols at the piano bench. While this could still be done and might be considered ideal, there are several very good reasons most educators don't attempt it today. The main reason is that most blind children are mainstreamed in public schools and the amount of time they have for learning braille is limited. A teacher of the visually impaired who sees the child once a week, if that often, must apportion her time carefully to make sure the child learns many skills beyond mere reading, that are essential for being able to keep up with all activities in the school curriculum and learn adaptive strategies. There are already several codes of braille necessary to learn to be able to read literature and math; introducing another one, and expecting that the child will have regular time to learn music using it, often appears to teachers as asking too much. Another is that although the braille music code is made up of the same six dots as the literary code and has signs for notes by their letter names, the correspondence between the literary code letters and the music letter names is not exact. Teachers fear getting the child confused at a time when it's essential to get the literary code down pat. But nothing stops the child from learning braille music when a little older. The big bonus is that if the child has mastered the art of reading braille, then any music teacher can work with him, following along in the print book. This does not require any knowledge

of braille beyond some very basic principles of how music is presented non-visually.

The best thing you can do at this beginning stage is to lay strong foundations-- about rhythm, about melody, about intervals, and how concepts of music have been codified so that meaningful discussion can take place. Knowing what it is about music that will make sense for wanting to read it someday will go a long way to motivate the child for reading later on. Just as it's much easier to teach someone to read if he first knows language and words, give your student a full exposure to the language of music. I work with students who are good musicians, but have learned by ear all their lives. Some are ready to learn to read it, and others resist. They find the thought of concentrating on written symbols and putting them together a far cry from what they consider the joy and spontaneity of music playing to be all about. What you do now can make all the difference in preparing someone to be a literate musician.

Having said that you may not be using beginner piano books, I would be remiss in not mentioning that the standard beginner books do exist in braille and were transcribed with great care and dedication. There are several sources of braille music, but the largest one in this country, and indeed, the world is the Music Section of the Library of Congress's National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, NLS. [NLS at the Library of Congress - National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled \(NLS\) | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](https://www.loc.gov/nls/)

(From the home page, click on the link titled "Music Material." Phone 1-800 424-8567, email [nlsm@loc.gov](mailto:nlsm@loc.gov)). The Music Section has several familiar series, including Alfred and Bastien. They may be older editions from what you use, but you can probably find print versions to match pretty closely if you want to go that route. Bear in mind that the books do use the braille music symbols. If there is a particular series you like, for the structure it provides, you can certainly use it, or read passages out loud to the student. However, when you think about it, you may find that their methods fall rather flat if you aren't able to see the illustrations on each page. In fact, the braille editions are filled with picture descriptions in parentheses, which make the book seem highly academic. They may be of benefit to blind teachers working with sighted children who have the books. For your teaching you will probably find yourself making your own lesson plans, sometimes using exercises inspired by your experience using the books

with others, sometimes using your own ideas and creativity based on the child's personality and interests.

I have noticed that many students using books measure their progress by the page or book number they have gotten to. Maybe that's why publishers make their books so small. The blind student may be more interested in the musical results and feel a sense of progress based on what the lessons have made him able to do. I suspect that for many, the personal goal may be to gain skills to play things that come into his head. For most of my life I absolutely rebelled against any kind of orthodox lesson because teachers wouldn't tell me the reasons behind what they wanted me to do. I wanted nothing to do with what I took as adult tyrannies of having peers taught piece after piece, without a higher aim than being asked to perform those pieces. . Not everyone is like that, of course, but I am sure you'll have a much more apt pupil if you say things like "the reason it's important to use the fingers I'm telling you to use is so you can find the notes you want quickly." (If the child uses a computer, he'll know how much easier it is to find letters after having had lessons in touch typing.) The same goes for scales. "Scales are useful, because melodies are made up of patterns like them, and if you learn them you'll be able to find the note you want when you want it." You can introduce little songs and then pieces by showing what the acquisition of the skills each requires will allow him to extend his ability in "free swim."

With all that in mind, here are some activity ideas:

Finding Middle C. It's a good habit to be able to find a note without having to hunt. This is particularly true for performance situations, where the student should be able to approach the piano and confidently find the beginning note without playing notes softly to double check. Explain how the black notes are in groups of two and three, and how each C is to the left of each set of two. A keyboard is a big expanse for a small child, and the pattern may not be obvious. If there is a problem finding the pattern and notes on the keyboard, perhaps confining the child's exploration to one or two octaves, placing boundaries to the left and right, will help. Explain again how using correct fingers will help find other notes. If you normally put print tags with the note names on piano keys, you could, in theory, do the same with braille labels. We have found that braille on the keys may not be all that helpful for finding notes—a sighted person can see and read several labels at a glance. ,We would only consider this if it would help the child associate the sound of a note he plays with the braille.

Even if the student doesn't have absolutely perfect pitch, he may be able to learn to recognize the sound of middle C, or A or G. I'm sure we all have different associations, and these may be rather private. For what it's worth, I used to associate middle C with our old vacuum cleaner, E with a fire siren near my grandparents' house, F and A with General Motor's car horns and the telephone dial tone, and B-flat with florescent lights and power adapters. Our electronic age has taken away telephone bells with D-sharp and G, and cash registers with bells in F. GE microwave ovens generally beep in C. All right, we'll go back to more socially acceptable conversation. You might explain that middle C is really in the middle. Show the student about putting both hands on C and then reaching out to the sides and back to C again.

Then you can move on to little songs, and whatever else you teach. One thing you might consider for structure is to use one of the methods easily adapted to oral learning. One I was introduced to recently was Simply Music, which has catchy little exercises with activity for both hands. Each one leads to another developing fluency skills around the keyboard. The student can work within the parameters each song gives to play with his own inventions. Preparing the Student for Reading Later.

It does not take long for a braille reader to learn the signs for braille music. The key to transitioning to reading is having good musical foundations and practice working with the elements that will have their place on the page. Most of the students who come to my program have gaps which prevent their being able to make immediate full use of the braille symbols they learn with us. For those who have been playing by ear, the gaps are in knowing how to deal with rhythmic values they find with each note-they have not needed to think in terms of measures or had to count things out. You can make your student a star by emphasizing counting from the very beginning. Exercises could include marching, clapping different patterns and asking the student to clap them back, and, later, beating out together quarter notes, eighths, sixteenths, etc. and having the student become good at telling you which is where. Don't forget dotted notes, which most people find a challenge. You might suggest the student participate in a school band. The benefits of that activity include becoming very good at following the beat, and counting to know when to come in.

On the pitch side, you can help the student learn the note names, recognize where middle C is in a pattern, etc. The experts suggest that students be taught to

think of notes interchangeably in three ways: their letter names, their solfege names, and the number of their appearance in the scale. Being able to think of notes by their numbers greatly helps in distinguishing intervals. I have found that students with close to perfect pitch like to think of notes by a given name, and can get a little upset if someone refers to what they have always thought of as a B-flat as an A-sharp. So it's important to explain key signatures, the circle of fifths, etc., and why notes are called sharps in keys like G and flats in keys like F. . I have tried explaining how a B-flat could be an A-sharp by asking, well, if you have an uncle Ed on your mother's side, what does your mom call him, and what does his daughter call him? Another game activity might be called "Where is Mr. Do", (or Jane Doe?) which would help students figure out where Do is, and consequently, what key the music is played in. People with good pitch may find it difficult to grasp the concept of a movable Do. Being able to think of the relationships between notes as solfege can prevent being bogged down by pitches and make it easier to read scores more quickly and analytically. Additional ideas on what the useful foundations are and how they can be taught are in the writings of Richard Taesch. Activities for teacher and student are given in the book "Who's Afraid of Braille Music" by Richard Taesch and William McCann, available from [Dancing Dots](#) or National Braille Press (See the Resources page on this web site.)

There are several other elements of ear training that you might want to start your blind pupil on before you normally do with others. Intervals are particularly important in braille music, because the code employs interval signs to spell notes in a chord. The student should be able not only to recognize them by sound but also tell you what note will be a sixth up from an a, for instance. And the student needs to be able to recognize intervals both up and down. Braille piano music shows the base note for the left hand and intervals going up, while for the right hand, intervals are shown as going down from the topmost note. Therefore, the student will need to wrestle with such concepts as how what is thought of as a fifth up could be shown as a fourth down, etc.

The more theory, the better, really. Students may be fascinated by cadences, and other devices that hint at the direction a piece of music will be going. Theory, after all, is a vocabulary or grammar, that gives terms and validates rules for what the student may have discovered but may not have had the words to express. You might want to spend time listening to music together, to see how such devices apply.

A word about staff notation. You and your student will probably both be more relaxed if you don't delve into what print music looks like too deeply. Notes in braille music are not written on a staff, and there are no lines, spaces, or clef signs. Instead, the notes are written as letters are in a word, with the measure bar line indicated by a space. Each symbol shows both the note's pitch and rhythmic value. Octave marks, usually before the measure show what octave the notes will be played in. So, while it's important for the student to know how others think of music notation and to be able to share ideas with others, it is not necessary to drill these concepts in. People have come up with various ways to represent the staff tactually, such as using pipe cleaners for lines and pennies or paper shapes for the notes. We list at least one commercial solution on the Resources page.

As previously mentioned, anything you can do to demonstrate to the person not yet reading that music reading is a good thing will go a long way. Avoid statements like "You'll need to be able to read this someday because I won't be around to show you." More positive would be to demonstrate how much can be learned by reading the composer's score about what he actually wanted, that you either cannot hear in a recording, or someone's interpretation has taken license with.

### Teaching Braille Music.

When the student has become a good braille reader, you should broach the subject of braille music with his family and teachers, because it is now probably in the realm of what the student can be expected to do. Often parents and teachers have heard braille music is too hard and will discourage the idea. You can declare from experience that eventually, the music will become too complicated to learn properly by ear or using recordings, and also, braille will be essential if the student plans on being able to take a regular theory or analysis class, not to mention participate in a choir. If you and the student already have a good rapport, then you can be the one to get the student started, and you don't need to know braille to do it. Several books have been written with this type of situation in mind. In fact, the Music Section of the Library of Congress lends out a print copy of the braille music learning books along with the braille, for the teacher to use. Note that these print books must be requested in the student's name; the student will need to have been registered with the Music Section.



Books on learning braille music fall into two categories: those that show the basics with only a few exercises, and those set up as a course. The courses are definitely the way to go if you and the student meet on a regular basis and there is enough time to incorporate them into lessons. The course books have exercises and drill in the areas that give people the most trouble. However, the other books work well also, and can soon be supplemented with actual piano music. A book that will give you a quick overview on how braille music works is "How to Read Braille Music" by Bettie Krolick. This is available from the Music Section and may be purchased for about \$17 from National Braille Press. The book we use most is the "Primer of Braille music", by Edward W. Jenkins, also available from the Music Section.

Often, the teaching of braille music can be a team approach. You know about music; the student is the braille expert. Let him explain how it works as you work together on the exercises. Once you get the rudiments down, you can skip the piano learning series and ask the Music Section for simple piano pieces. For the more advanced, the Bach two-part inventions are available, as well as the pieces you would expect in standard repertoire. A wide variety of material of graded difficulty may be found in the Suzuki books available in braille. You can get an idea of what's available by going to the Music Section's web site given above, and then to the link called "catalog search." Many music titles are available for download, for embossing on a braille printer, or for a student to read on a braille display. Another site for downloading music, which you will find on the resources page, is the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in England. They offer exam music for piano at all grade levels for at least the two most recent syllabi.

A note about braille displays--the student will be happy to show you what's meant by that if he has one. The nature of music, especially piano music, which shows a line for each hand, makes it difficult to read on a one-line display.

If you are wondering whether you will need any unfamiliar technology, you may not need anything beyond a simple recording and playback device for the beginning student. So far, we have not found software for ear training that's really practical or does not use visual elements. Older students and budding composers may enjoy MIDI sequencing or audio software. You or the family will need the expertise of someone who understands about accessibility, the screen reader the student uses, and the student's level of computer ability. The same holds for metronomes and tuners—make sure the student will be able to work them

independently. Software also exists to convert music files or print music notation into braille. One major source is Dancing Dots Braille Music Technology. The beginning teacher is advised to check first to see what material is already available before attempting to produce it by means of technology. Training is required. For situations where the braille equivalent cannot be found, there are professional braille transcribers who are able to produce what is required at a nominal fee.

For the Student with Low Vision. If you have a student who can read large print, chances are that the family will want you to use enlarged music. Each person's ability will be different, and you should be sure you will have access to the student's vision teacher or others with proper expertise. There is a possibility that the student's vision loss may have been diagnosed as progressive. That could mean that while enlarged music made on a copier may work for a while, it may not be the answer a year from now. There are other options. Music is available in large print format from several sources. A system called the Lime Lighter, from Dancing Dots, can enlarge music on a computer screen. The Lime Lighter is not inexpensive. A way should be found for the student to try out a demo version. Depending on the individual, there may be other technology solutions. The family will need to be involved.

We emphasize again that people are out there who can help. Be creative, but remember also that there have been lots and lots of blind or vision impaired students who have taken piano lessons. Rather than reinvent the wheel, check the resources on this web site and tune your attention to picking up clues. You might find there is someone with experience living locally or that there is a school for the blind not far away that can provide a reference.

This is a challenge you are definitely up to. Enjoy your student.

David Goldstein is director of the National Resource Center for Blind Musicians. We are excited that David has joined the Vision Through Music team and will bring his expertise to the program.