

MAKE-UP MUSIC LESSONS FROM AN ECONOMIST'S POINT OF VIEW

BY VICKY BARHAM, PH.D.

As a parent of children enrolled in Suzuki music lessons, I would like to explain to other parents why I feel quite strongly that it is unreasonable of us to expect teachers to make up lessons we miss. I know as well as other parents just how expensive lessons are and how vital the weekly contact with the teacher is. I think it is natural for parents to share the point of view that students should have their missed lessons rescheduled. However, if we were to "walk a mile" in our teachers' shoes, we might change our minds about what is reasonable for us to expect.

Like many parents, I pay in advance for lessons each term. In my mind, what this means is that I have reserved a regular spot in the busy schedules of my sons' teachers. I understand—fully—that if I can't make it to the lesson one week. (perhaps one of my sons is sick, or we are away on holiday, or there is some major event at school) then we will pay for the lesson. My teacher is under no obligation to find another spot for me that week, or to refund me for the untaught lesson. This is the way it should be.

In my "other life", I am an economist who teaches at our local university. Students pay good money to attend classes at the university, but if they don't come to my lecture on Monday morning, I am not going to turn around and give them a private tutorial on Tuesday afternoon. When I go to the store and buy groceries, I may purchase something that does not get used. Days or months later, I may end up throwing it out. I don't get a refund from the grocery store for the unused merchandise. If I sign up my child for swimming lessons at the local pool, and s/he refuses to return after the first lesson, I can't get my money back. So there are many situations in our everyday lives where we pay in advance for goods or services. If we end up not using what we have purchased, we have to just "swallow our losses." On the other hand, if I purchase an item of clothing and change my mind when I get home, I can take it back and expect either a refund or a store credit.

So why do I believe that music lessons fall into the category of "nonreturnable"? Speaking now as an economist, items like clothing are "durable goods"—meaning, they can be returned and then resold at the original price. Music lessons, on the other hand, are "non-durable" goods—meaning, once my Monday slot at 3:30 is gone, my son's teacher cannot turn around and sell it again. The only way she would be able to give him a lesson later in the week would be for her to give up time that was scheduled for her own private life, and that seems pretty unreasonable. I can't think of many employees who would be thrilled if their bosses were to announce that they couldn't work from 3:30 to 4:30 this after-



Vicki Barham with her two sons

noon, but would they please stay until 6:30 on Thursday, because there would be work for them then!

Many teachers hesitate to refuse requests to shift lesson times (our busy schedules do change), because unless they keep us happy, we will decide to take our child somewhere else for lessons, and they will lose part of their income. This is particularly true in areas with lower average incomes where it can be particularly difficult to find students. Rather than telling us, "Well, actually, the only time when I'm not teaching is during the time I set aside each week to go for a long soul-cleansing walk," they agree to teach us at a time that really doesn't suit their schedule. Teachers who are "nice" in this way often, in the long run, end up exhausted and feeling exploited.

Too few parents ask to switch only when absolutely necessary. Many parents want lesson changes for their own convenience. The only time that I would feel entitled to request a change would be: 1. An obligation at the Suzuki School conflicts with our lesson time. 2. The teacher were to ask us to participate in some other activity (e.g. orchestra, etc.). If the conflict arises because my child is in the school play, and they have their dress rehearsal during his lesson time, then I feel we must choose between the two activities. If he attends the dress rehearsal, my private lesson teacher does not owe me anything.

During May, my eldest son will be missing three lessons. He is accompanying me on a trip to New Zealand to visit his great-grandparents. I don't expect my son's teacher to refund me for these missed lessons, or to reschedule them by "doubling up" lessons in the weeks before or after our departure. Since there will be sufficient advance notice, I might ask her to consider preparing a special "practice tape" for that period, or to answer my questions via e-mail. If she doesn't have the time and has to refuse, that's fine. I certainly do not expect her to credit me with three make-up lessons. There is no way for her to find a student to fill a three-week hole in her schedule created by our absence. Instead, I hope that she will enjoy the extra hour of rest during those three weeks, and that we will all feel renewed enthusiasm when we return to lessons at the end of the trip. ♪

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