

## Training a Child's Ear

### Jacob, the Quietly Confident Pianist

Jacob had incredible musical talent. Although he was only 14 years old, it seemed like he could play anything. I watched as he sat down at the piano and began playing a popular song from the radio. All the other kids were drawn to him. They crowded in closely and listened, totally enraptured. He'd occasionally throw in some fancy embellishments and the kids' jaws would drop. Everyone wanted to know, "How do you do that?"

Jacob was an impressive kid because he was humble, yet quietly confident. He was passionate about music and loved sharing his talent. Whenever someone asked him, "How do you do that?" he was happy to patiently show them a neat little piano trick or two. His musical ability had given him this confidence. He knew, deep down inside, that he could do great things. And this gave him a rock solid sense of self-worth.

I meet parents all the time who want their kids to be like Jacob. They want their kids to be able to play the music that brings them joy and they want their kids have that great vision of themselves. Kids who can play by ear can listen to a favorite song and then blast it out on the keyboard. These kids are also better at composing their own songs. After all, before you can play your song, you first have to recognize the melody you hear in your head and be able to reproduce it on your instrument.

Jacob's ability probably seemed out of reach to the kids who gathered around him—like a mystical gift that's bestowed on some while bypassing others. However, playing by ear is a skill that can be developed. All it takes is a roadmap and practice. Your child can possess Jacob's skill and his quiet confidence.

### Your Roadmap

This professional guide will serve as your roadmap to help you train your child's or your student's ear. When you follow this roadmap and practice often, you will see steady progress and, before long your child will be playing just like Jacob.

## Step 1: Develop Confidence and Careful Listening

First help the child learn to listen critically and gain confidence that she can train her ear. Start simple. Kids first need to learn how to pay careful attention and learn to distinguish simple differences between notes.

For example, you might begin by playing a single note and asking the child to tell you if the note sounds high or low. Again, beginning with small concepts that can be quickly mastered gives kids the confidence that they can be successful.

Other simple activities you can use when you're just beginning include:

- Playing two notes and asking the child to tell you if the two notes were the same pitch or different pitches.
- Playing a sequence of four notes and asking the child to tell you if the notes sound like they're going up or down.
- Asking the child to repeat a simple rhythm.

### Make it Fun

Ear training requires practice and your child or student will be excited about practicing if you use fun activities. Eartrainingandimprov.com has tons of activity ideas to help you. Visit <http://www.eartrainingandimprov.com/ear-training/beginner-ear-training-games/> to see the beginner ear training games.

## Step 2: Identify the Distance Between Notes

When your child or student has learned to listen carefully and can distinguish notes, you can start more advanced ear training that will be immediately of service for playing by ear.

Let's say your child heard a neat song that he wants to play. He's able to figure out the first note, but doesn't know where to go after that. He could use trial-and-error to tediously pick out every note in the song, but if he learned to identify intervals, figuring out which note comes next would be a breeze.

An interval is the distance between two notes. You'll find detailed instructions on how to identify intervals at Eartrainingandimprov.com. The easiest way to memorize intervals is to identify a familiar song that uses that interval. A favorite with kids is a fun printout showing cartoons relating each interval to a song. You can view that printable at <http://www.eartrainingandimprov.com/ear-training-intervals-with-visuals/>.

### **Step 3: Practice Playing Simple Songs by Ear**

You actually don't have to wait to start playing by ear. I recommend that you give even very young kids the challenge to figure out simple songs with the trial-and-error method as outlined at Eartrainingandimprov.com: <http://www.eartrainingandimprov.com/how-to-teach-kids-to-play-by-ear/>

Here are some simple songs you can start with:

- Mary Had a Little Lamb
- Row Your Boat
- Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

As stated earlier, playing by ear gets easier as your ear gets better trained, but kids can successfully learn a simple song even before they've finished with the first two steps.

Last Christmas, I assigned my 5 and 6 year old students to figure out Silent Night by ear and gave them a special instruction sheet. They loved the activity! They were all successful and this gave them confidence to tackle more songs. You can view and print the instructions for the Silent Night activity we used here: <http://www.eartrainingandimprov.com/how-to-play-silent-night-by-ear/>

I have many starter sheets for favorite songs that you can use to give kids practice. You can view and print them here: <http://www.eartrainingandimprov.com/ear-training/playing-by-ear/>

### **Step 4: Harmonize**

When your child can recognize and copy a melody, she's ready to learn how to harmonize that melody. Harmonies take a simple melody and make it more exciting. Utilize the more advanced resources at Eartrainingandimprov.com to help your child or student learn to recognize different harmonies and learn how to use them to embellish her favorite songs.

### **Playing by Ear is Fun**

Playing by ear is a skill that can be learned and that brings lifelong enjoyment. When you help a child to train her ear, you make it possible for her to play nearly any song in a fraction of the time it would take to learn the notation. Before long the child you teach will be creating her own arrangements of her favorite songs and sharing them with her family and friends. Training a child's ear is definitely worth it!