

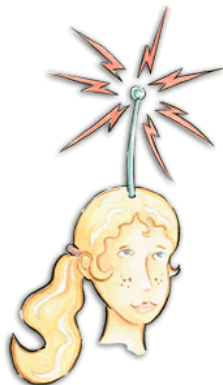
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Getting Smarter Note by Note

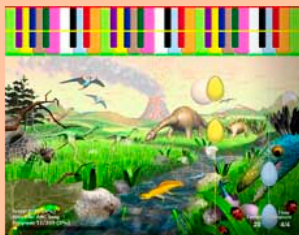
Schools are Skimping on Music Programs; Can Technology Help

Published: December, 2005

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The research is indisputable. Kids who play music perform better on a variety of academic measures. For example, high school music students score higher on SATs in both verbal and math than their peers.* And recent study at Stanford University found that playing music can help how the brain processes the spoken word.

But it's the classic chicken and egg syndrome. Are kids better at their schoolwork when they start playing music or is it that better students will be more likely to study music in the first place? Here, the evidence is less clear.



The beginner's level of Piano Wizard uses color-matching to teach music.

Whichever you believe the obstacles to studying music in school have intensified largely due to two things: budget cuts in education and the current obsession with getting good test scores on state and national tests at the expense of all else.

Private music lessons can cost a pretty penny and often parents spend hard earned money on kids who haven't really demonstrated any commitment.

Technology as Music Teacher

Many people think that technology can take the place of a music teacher. I think it's pretty doubtful. What technology can do is help you whet your child's appetite for music, gauge their aptitude, and teach them a few fundamentals.

About fifteen years ago a product called The Miracle Piano was introduced. (It is still sold on eBay.) It was an electronic keyboard that plugged into your PC. You learned piano by playing shoot 'em up games where, if you pressed the right piano key, you shot the right note (with the right timing). You gained points as you learned to play. A voice synthesized teacher gave mini lessons and you gave a performance before you graduated and moved on to the next set of skills.

A considerably modernized teaching system is Piano Wizard (www.pianowizard.com) (Allegro Multimedia) and it's quite revolutionary because its inventor says kids should learn to play and enjoy music before they are hampered with the obstacle of reading notes.

The Piano Wizard (\$200) uses an electronic keyboard but the first thing you do is add different colored stick-ons to all of the keys on the keyboard. You learn to play by color matching. You press the colored key that matches the color on screen (notes can be disguised as eggs or rockets, for example. Tempo and color both count, but you don't need to read notes at all until you've progressed a considerable way. When you begin to learn to read music the colored icons are put in the context of a music staff. You are supposed to make the transition from just attending to color, to attending to spatial placement on the staff as well. Ultimately you lose the color coding and you're reading music!

I've played this game with 5 kids and I'm a big believer in the first part of the theory. Kids love playing the music without getting bogged down in reading the notes. (Though they all had trouble moving their eyes back and forth from the colored keys on the keyboard to the on screen display; piano students are taught not to look at the keys.) They picked up the simple songs quickly and have great fun.. However, only one of the five had the stick-to-it-ness to move on to the note reading game and she already knew how to read music.

Reading music is different than playing a video game starring music. The schism between the two is large -- perhaps so large that only a motivated student and a real teacher can cross it. Piano Wizard is a nice way to introduce students to making music and offer them a quick rewarding experience. But don't expect it to be the answer to scratching the music teacher off of the budget.



The Piano Wizard Kit costs \$200.