

Frequently Asked Questions about learning guitar

www.Guitar-Lessons.us

Rev: 2 © 2010 John Chamley

What is a good age to start learning guitar?

There is a window of opportunity between the ages of 8 and 10 that is the best time to start playing guitar. Earlier than eight is possible, but the muscle development and coordination skills required to play could take too long to develop and the child may become discouraged. Starting out older than 10 and the desires to ONLY want to play something “cool” start to factor in. This is not always the case and doesn't mean that guitar cannot be taught, but it's a common issue. Eight is the best age to learn music reading, technique and essential theory as a solid foundation to play any style.

If a student older than ten already has a number of years diligently playing another instrument, they are likely to learn guitar quickly. Musical sense is easily transferred between instruments.

Adult learners being more mentally & physically mature can actually learn quickly. The problem most working adults seem to run into is being able to dedicate enough time.

How can I help my child learn guitar?

Parents can help the student to organize their practice time and provide a good environment free of distractions. Parents can also monitor progress and use their intuition to determine whether the student is using time wisely, even if the parent has no experience with guitar or music.

How long and how frequently should my child practice?

Lessons are often only once a week, leaving six days in between to practice. Students are taught during lessons but they should MASTER the concepts in between. It's discouraging for both teacher and student to start a lesson and realize that the student has made no progress – and worse, needs to be retaught. I recommend students practice soon after a lesson so they don't forget details of the lesson, then daily to develop skills. Practice time may be only 15 minutes or could be several hours depending on age and commitment, but it should be a realistic achievable goal. For younger children, 20 to 30 minutes a day can develop good musical abilities. If this is not possible due to homework, sports, birthday parties, play-dates etc... then at least try to play something every day. Even 10 minutes will help.

As important as the amount of time spent practicing is being able to practice wisely and focus on what has been taught. A certain amount of experimenting or playing around is fine, but when following a path of study it's important to stay on the path and keep moving forward.

Where should I buy a guitar and how much should I spend?

You don't need to buy an expensive guitar for a beginner but you need one that is setup correctly and has no major problems. PLEASE buy from a music store and NOT a toy store. Trust me here: TOY stores sell TOYS! I recommend buying from a bricks and mortar MUSIC store where you can return an instrument found to have a problem. Problems with instruments are common. I have seen problems on both store-brand and name-brand products. Some problems are minor and can be adjusted, but when inexpensive guitars have major problems they are often not worth repairing. If you have no experience with guitars, have someone knowledgeable check out the instrument that you buy. I check guitars that my students bring to lessons and let them know of any issues. Buy a guitar that has a warranty. I suggest not buying on Ebay or craigslist if you have no guitar experience, or you may find

yourself with one of those inexpensive defective guitars that has no warranty! Online reputable retailers may be okay, but be prepared to return a guitar that has a problem and be without an instrument until you get a replacement.

What size and type of guitar is best for a beginner?

Guitars are made in full scale, $\frac{3}{4}$ scale, $\frac{1}{2}$ scale and other sizes. The scale refers to the length of strings suspended between the nut and the bridge. Music stores may not carry all of the sizes, but for eight year olds I have found $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{7}{8}$ sizes to be a good fit. Younger children or children with smaller fingers may be better off with a $\frac{1}{2}$ size. A music store with informed personal, or a guitar teacher can recommend an appropriate size. Most of my students start on a smaller guitar, then jump to a full scale guitar after a few years.

There are three popular types of guitar:

Classical guitars, that have nylon strings and a hollow body.

Acoustic guitars that have steel strings and a hollow body.

Solid body electric guitars that have steel strings.

Hollow body guitars naturally amplify and project sound while solid body electric guitars use magnetic pickups and need electronic amplification to be heard well. Each type of guitar is associated with different styles of music.

Classical guitars have less string tension than acoustic guitars and are easier to play for a beginner. They have a more mellow sound than a steel string guitar. Remember that you should NOT put steel strings onto a classical guitar because it will likely damage the guitar.

Acoustic guitars have more of a “twang”. They are built with internal cross bracing to handle the high tension of steel strings.

Electric guitars usually have light gauge steel strings. Most beginner guitars have solid bodies and come packaged with a small amplifier.

Any of these can be used to learn on although the electric guitar complicates things a little because of the cables and amplification that need to be setup to play.

What is a good way to practice?

At the beginning of practice it's important to warm up. Do finger stretches then play something very simple and slow. Scales are good for this. Try to make each note of a scale sound as perfect as possible and let each note ring as long as possible so that one note connects to the next (play legato), listening carefully to each note. Don't be satisfied with buzzing or notes that get cut off too soon. Playing this way connects our senses of touch, hearing and sight as we watch our fingers. It helps to get the mind ready to be in control for practicing whatever music pieces we are working on.

When practicing music pieces it's always hard, even for me, to play something slow enough that you can do it without making a mistake. I often follow a metronome set to a very slow pace forcing myself to slow down. With each music piece, break the piece up into short excerpts and focus on each excerpt by itself. Once you have several excerpts practiced, try playing them together. This is a time tested method that works. It teaches us that patience pays off and gives a sense of achievement after you find yourself able to play something that you couldn't before.