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## Size Really Matters

The process of starting the next generation of instrumentalists is the goal of every instrumental music teacher. Band directors use a wide variety of activities to recruit and/or generate enthusiasm for learning to play an instrument. Many directors have parent nights where they may bring in outside vendors to demonstrate and explain their rental procedures for their instrument company. An important part of the procedures would be allowing students a chance to try instruments so that a more informed decision can be made that will allow students to succeed on their instrument. Some students may discover that they have more immediate success on instruments that may be more suited to them physically.

So why does size matter? One can think of sizes in two ways; the size of the instrument and the physical size of the student. The young musicians learn best by doing and/or kinesthetically becoming involved with their instrument. When students are presented with something new to learn they will automatically connect their learning to their relationship with the physical world. The relationship between the technique of playing an instrument and adjustments in the playing technique will lead the student to continued success on the instrument. The relationship then becomes with the instrument (physical size of the instrument) and the physical makeup of the student. Imitation is how students learn and is an important part of the process (Suzuki Talent Education). From the first introduction of the instrument, students establish a physical connection between their instruments and this connection will continue to as they “grow” physically. This will sometimes lead to poor technique and technical problems in their playing. Students will try to re-establish the same feel with their instruments from the first time so they may miss keys, sit with inappropriate posture, miss slide positions, etc.

### Let's take a look at woodwind players.

The size of the fingers will determine the success for covering the holes (clarinet) and reaching the keys (flute, clarinet, and saxophone). Beginning woodwind students will remember and re-establish the same “feeling” each and every time they pick their instrument up to play. If the holes were difficult to cover, they will overcompensate to make sure that the holes are covered and if the keys were difficult to reach because their hand size is small they will over compensate the movement of the hand to reach the keys. As the students grow, they will re-establish the same “feeling” that they had as a beginner player, which may lead to students missing holes and over shooting keys. Band directors may in turn think that the student is being lazy about the technique of playing the instrument when quite the opposite may be happening. The relationship of the mouthpiece to arm length – how far away the mouthpiece is to the instrument is another important factor to consider with a beginning woodwind player as this is directly related to the angle of instrument. A beginner player will feel this angle as an over exaggerated movement and as the student grows, they will continue to over exaggerate this movement to continue this relationship to their instrument.

Woodwind players may often over compensate their embouchures such as the feeling of swallowing the reed to gain a correct open sound. Again as they grow physically, they may continue this and actually have too much mouthpiece in the mouth, thus creating a flat pitch on their instrument. In addition, a beginning player will often accommodate the size of the instrument by adjusting posture such as placing the bell on their knee (clarinet), playing off to the side, laying the right arm of the saxophone on the leg, putting the right arm on the back of the chair (flute). If allowed to continue, once the students begins to grow physi-

cally, they will continue these habits so that they can continue the “established feel” that created some level of success on their instrument.

### So what about the brass players?

The relationship of the mouthpiece to arm length and /or how far away the mouthpiece is to the brass instrument is an important consideration. This relationship is directly related to the angle of the instrument and is important for all beginning brass players. A beginner player will feel this angle as an over exaggerated movement allowing their instruments to angle downward and as they grow they will continue to over exaggerate this movement to continue this relationship to their instrument. Beginning brass players may also feel the mouthpiece they are using is big so as they grow and their embouchures develop the smaller mouthpiece may prevent continued success on their instrument. Once again as a student develops they may try to move the mouthpiece around to regain the same feeling they established as a beginner player. Simply changing the size of the mouthpiece will assist the growing musician.

The size of the instrument to the player will also affect posture when playing a brass instrument. A beginning player will often accommodate the size of the instrument by placing the bell on their knee (trumpet), playing at an extreme downward angle, and placing the right elbow on the leg. If allowed to continue, once a student begins to physically grow, they will continue these habits so that they can continue the “established feel” that created some level of success on their instrument.

For brass instruments with valves (trumpet), the right hand should be placed so that the fingertips curve in a relaxed manner above the valve buttons. For beginner players with small hands, the director may allow the student to

lay the fingers a little flatter and as they grow, they will continue this feeling and overshoot the buttons that cause decreased accuracy and speed moving the valves. The beginner player may also feel that the left hand position is stretched and as the player grows their hands will feel cramped so they will move the hand around to re-establish the feeling they established as a beginner. This may cause the left hand to be out of place for the use of the first valve slide and the third valve slide.

For trombone players, an important aspect is to establish the proper placement and feel for the seven positions. Beginner players will have shorter arms so 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> positions may feel a stretch. Even 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> position may require a stretch in arm span to reach the desired length of tubing, however, as the student grows, they will continue to move their arm as they had without realizing they have gone beyond the desired position on the trombone. In addition, holding the trombone to gain an appropriate balance is difficult for the beginner player. This may result in tilting the head downward. Once again as the student grows, he/she may replicate this feeling to accomplish the same feel for their instrument.

## Percussion

Establishing a physical relationship with instruments is part of the learning process and very critical to the success of the beginning instrumentalist. Beginning percussionists select sticks/mallets based upon musical need and size of the student. Beginner players need a stick/mallet that would have some weight for developing an appropriate stroke. The stick is held between the thumb and the first curve of the index finger, which wraps around the sticks. Beginning players may have smaller hands when they start, however, as they grow, they may develop more tension in the thumb and index finger to re-establish the same feeling they had as a beginner. Using a

heavier stick assists the player with control and coordination.

Two other areas of consideration for the beginning percussionist is the height of the instrument and posture adjustments needed for each instrument. The height of the percussion instrument (snare drum) should be such that the player's forearms are parallel to the floor. This will require an adjustment to the stand height and as the player begins to grow physically, they forget that their forearms are parallel to the floor and have simply memorized how far to lower and/or raise the stand. In some instances, the snare stand may not have the adjustment needed to raise the stand to the appropriate height and the student will settle for what the stand can do and make it work thus allowing inappropriate technique for playing the instrument. In addition to appropriate stand height, some players may need to elevate the instrument (keyboard and tympani) by using wooden blocks. Conversely, younger players may need to stand on several boards/riser to play the keyboard instruments. The timpanist may need to sit on a stool to lower the upper torso to the drums.

The relationship between the technique of playing an instrument and adjustments in the playing technique will lead the student to continued success on the instrument. The young musicians learn best by doing and/or kinesthetically becoming involved with their instrument. They connect their learning to their relationship with the physical world and how the instrument "feels" when they start the learning process. As band directors it is important to allow students the opportunity to try instruments out so that they can discover the physical connection and the necessary physical requirements needed to play each of the instruments, however, their physical needs will change as they develop and grow as a person. Students will establish a physical connection between their instruments and will continue to reconnect the same feeling as

they "grow". This sometimes leads to poor technique and technical problems in their playing. Students will remember how the instrument feels each time they pick the instrument up so as a student grows, directors will need to continually reinforce proper technique and assist with physical playing adjustments so the students continue to succeed on their instrument.

## References

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