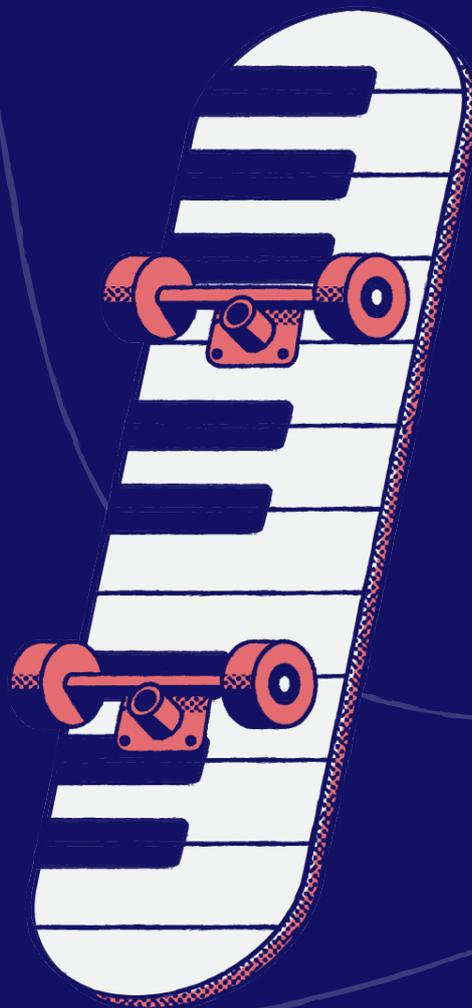


# Teen Teaching Toolkit

HOW TO MOTIVATE, INSPIRE AND RETAIN YOUR  
TEENAGE PIANO STUDENTS



# Thanks!

FIRSTLY, THANKS FOR DOWNLOADING THIS EBOOK.

The fact that you have set aside time to extend your teaching, and more importantly, enrich the lives of your teenage students through their music lessons, is both inspiring and exciting. I'm really happy to be part of your journey and I look forward to hearing about the results you achieve.



**This book is about teenagers. Specifically, it's a book of ideas for how to best structure your piano teaching in order to motivate and appeal to teen students.**

If you are teaching teenagers who are studying for their Diploma at age 13, this book probably won't be much help to you. Similarly, if your student is performing Beethoven's Op. 111 for his Carnegie Hall debut, I don't think you've got too many motivational issues in your studio! These kinds of kids don't need any more motivation than they've already got!

But what if you teach what I would call 'normal' teenagers: the ones who like to hang out in the city on the weekends, play sports (often more than one), sleep in, waste time watching TikToks and get completely absorbed in computer games for hours on end? The ones who have school musical practice, gym and karate all on the same day after school?

In my experience, keeping beginner teens motivated at this age takes a lot of energy and resources and I therefore hope you will find the strategies in this ebook both current and relevant. I also hope that they are immediately useful in your teaching.

Keep in mind that most of the strategies herein are actually relevant to teaching piano students in general, so if you don't have teenage students yet, I still hope you get some value from reading.

I wish you and your teenage students all the best for 2020 and beyond.

**Tim Topham**

APRIL 2020

# Why did I write this book?

Most of my teaching career has focussed on teaching 12 – 18 year old students. I've spent a lot of time researching teen education strategies. I've done a lot of reading, writing, attending conferences, presenting, blogging and connecting with as many teachers as possible to discuss effective teaching strategies for this age group. I've also learnt heaps from my own students about what works and what doesn't!

I love sharing teaching ideas that work because I want as many students as possible to have an enjoyable experience with music, just as I did when I was growing up.

Sadly, stories of teens quitting piano are all too common.

**“Teenagers don't quit piano because they don't like music, it's much more likely to be due to ineffective teaching and/or a lack of connection with their teacher.”**

While working with teenagers, I've also worked a lot with teenage beginners: students who start learning piano between the ages of 14 and 17. They are very different to students who begin learning piano when they are 6-8.

**“Motivating teenagers who start learning piano in their mid-teens is a truly specialised art.”**

# Why did I write this book?

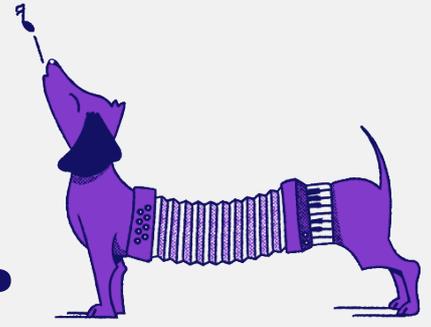
It requires a special connection between teacher and student, lots of new music and repertoire ideas and lots of teaching practice! Hopefully this eBook will be a useful guide for your own teaching in this area.

If you're new to teaching teens, or if some of the following ideas are outside your comfort zone, don't feel you need to incorporate them all at once. Take a few weeks to let your subconscious develop the ideas to suit your personality and teaching style. You'll soon find moments during your teaching when you can try something new that you remember reading.

Ultimately, as long as you're trying something new every week, you're going to develop and improve as a teacher. And that is the best thing for your students!



# Tip # 1: Be proactive.



VITAL THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU EVEN  
START TEACHING...

**Always find out why your new teenage student wants to learn the piano.**

- Have they seen their new high school friends playing in a band and thought it looked cool? Have they got older or younger siblings that play an instrument? Do they just want to play one piece of music from a movie they watched on the holidays? Are they a singer wanting to accompany themselves? Are they already making beats in their bedroom and looking to learn more about music producing? Are they being forced?
- Their answer to the above question will give you a big insight into how you'll need to structure your lessons to engage them. **If a student wants to learn a cool piece of film music but you always start your students on Alfred's Primer Book A, you're not going to get very far with this student (see Tip #2: Be Flexible).**

**Even if your teenage student cannot really articulate why they want to learn, one of the priorities for most teens will be to play something cool that everyone knows (even if it's just 5 seconds of a catchy pop riff).**

- It is amazing how much of a buzz students get from playing something that everyone can instantly recognise. It's probably the best instant gratification there is for pianists! I call it **The Hook**.
- The ability to play something famous is **always relevant**. To be able to play something cool in front of their school assembly or their friends at home after school can be incredibly affirming. **If you're not teaching "cool" stuff, you're likely to lose many of your teenagers.**
- If you're not sure what's "cool" at the moment, just ask your students!

**Find out as much as you can about your teen students, right from the start. What do they do for fun on the weekends? Where do they go on holidays? What do they watch on TV? What's their favourite movie or video game?**

- I found out last year that one of my teenagers was a brilliant artist. When I asked to see his work, he shyly brought in his design book and I was completely blown away. Another boy I taught was really into woodworking and was building the most elaborate frames, boxes and cupboards in his spare time. Many of my students play multiple sports. Some of them are actors in the school musical. I even found out that one student was playing piano for their local church and I didn't even know about it! All this information helps form connections with your students.
- You might be surprised at your students' hobbies. Knowing and appreciating them can be really affirming for the student. It can also help build rapport and allow you to make your teaching more relevant.

**If you want to know about a teen's musical tastes, ask them what they listen to.**

- I normally ask them something like, "If I was to shuffle the songs on your phone right now, what songs would come up?" They may even want to try it out and show you!

**If you don't understand what they are talking about, ask them about it.**



- If your student describes a song or band you've never heard of, ask them about it and watch it together on YouTube. Yes, it might take a couple of minutes of lesson time, but you've started connecting with them more deeply than you would have through a passing comment. Show genuine interest, even if it's not your musical preference.

- If your student tells you that their favourite sport is “Futsal”, find out more about it. Learn as much as you can. I recently found out that one of my students was in the state league under 18 hockey team. Others have been going to national swimming trials. From their response, you will learn something that might be applicable in your lessons with both this student and others.



## Pop music can be a huge motivator for piano students, but what if you've never taught pop before?

WHERE DO YOU START? WHAT IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE MUSIC? WHAT IF YOU CAN'T FIND THE MUSIC? WHAT IF THE MUSIC IS TOO HARD?

One of my first training courses for piano teachers is called [Pianoflix: Teaching Pop Piano](#) and it's now available to members of [Top Music Pro](#). It's an online 8-part video series that answers all these questions and more.

Join us today at [topmusicpro.com](http://topmusicpro.com)



# Tip # 2: Be flexible.

TEENAGERS WILL NOT FIT INTO THE  
STRUCTURES YOU USE TO TEACH  
8 YEAR OLDS.

I've found teens tend to fall into four categories when it comes to learning music:

1. **Total Beginners** – these students are totally green and have zero experience except for a little dabbling.
  2. **Composers** – these kids love to explore sounds and make up music. They often have a really good ear and can pick-up and play tunes easily. They are creative.
  3. **“YouTubers”** – these kids have already learned a number of complex pieces by watching other people teach them on YouTube, but their music reading is well behind.
  4. **Readers (if you get this type, you're lucky!)** – these students have already picked-up some basics of music reading, perhaps from lessons when they were younger, playing another instrument, or from music classes at school.
- As teachers, we need to cater for all these musical personality types and we need to work firstly from a point of strength. **If they enjoy making up music, forcing them to only play written music will end in disaster.** Similarly, if you take on a YouTuber, chances are they won't be able to read a note. If you discourage (or, worse, ban) them from playing the cool music they learn on YouTube and instead force them back to a method book to learn to read notes, you're going to lose them for sure.
  - **For non-readers, make note reading only a small part of the lesson.** Encourage them to keep learning how to play things by tutorial/rote while they learn to read music. It might take a year or two, but I've had many teenagers learn to read music effectively while still playing the "cool" stuff they learn on YouTube. It keeps them motivated while reading progress is slow.

- While I'm talking about teen "composers" and "YouTubers", don't ever ask them to play "baby" note-learning music at recitals! When I give simple music to my teenagers in order to practice reading, I remind them that it doesn't matter how 'childish' the piece may be, it's just for note learning and they will not have to perform it in front of anyone but me. I even make fun of it. Only use 'cool' stuff and their hooks for recitals.
- If something's not working, change activity. Fast! I've had some great success with teens but I've also had some pretty epic fails. Don't stress – at least you're trying new things!

**You're going to need to keep lots of plates spinning to keep your teens engaged.**

- Have lots of ideas and tricks up your sleeve. Preparing an all-Beethoven recital for a year in the future is not normally what a teenagers want to do. Keep time-frames short and you'll have more success. Goal setting is important and the teens need to be in control.

# Tip # 3: Be cool.

BUILD RAPPORT. LEARN TO LAUGH AT YOURSELF: STUDENTS LEARN FROM TEACHERS THEY LIKE.



**Be the teacher that encourages his/her students to play what they want.**

- It doesn't matter how much you loathe a piece of music, if it's going to motivate a teen student to practice, go with it. Restrict the amount of time you spend on it during a lesson by all means, but don't blacklist it. Support them to learn it and they will also play what you want.

## Encourage students to bring in music they want to play.

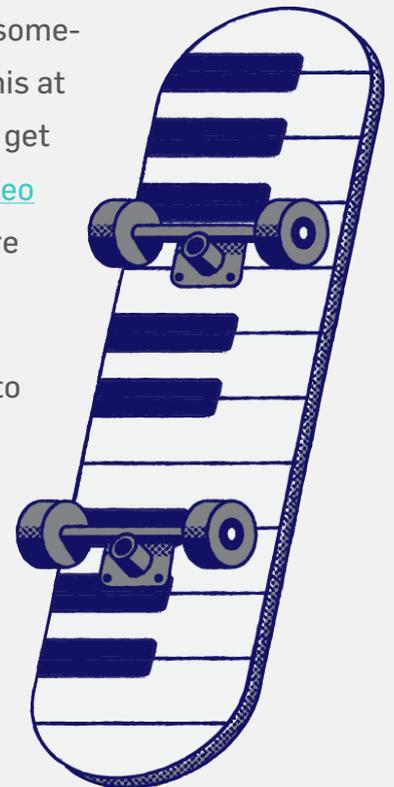
- Yes, you might find that students bring in the hardest, most unplayable transcriptions you've ever read but don't stress! [You can teach it and the students will do more practice than you could ever imagine if they really want to learn it.](#) Check my [online training course Pianoflix](#) to learn how to teach music that students bring into lessons, even if it's way too hard for them to play.

## Have a sense of humour. Nothing kills rapport with teens faster than an old fuddy-duddy!

- Kids know whether you care about them and will take the cue. Share some of your life with them. Let them know the kind of music you like playing and listening to. Do you have some interesting hobbies? Do you like sports or video games? Are you having lessons with a teacher? Let them know that you're open to learning and that you're having to practise too.
- Even if you're tired and feel completely shattered, be fun and keep your humour up – it'll help motivate you to teach and your students will respond.

## Keep abreast of current music and teen culture.

- What video game is the most popular at the moment? Get someone to show you how to play it. Try it out (you can often do this at department/game stores). Experience something new and get in the minds of your students. [I blog regularly about video games and music](#) – learn about it and you'll connect far more deeply with students.
- What pop music is best? Become a [Top Music Pro Member](#) to keep up to date and to ask questions of our Expert.
- [Spotify and YouTube](#) are two of the best ways of keeping current with musical trends. If you don't know about Spotify, read my article: [Spotify: a paradigm shift in music listening?](#) and try it out today. It's free!





# Tip # 4: Be relevant.

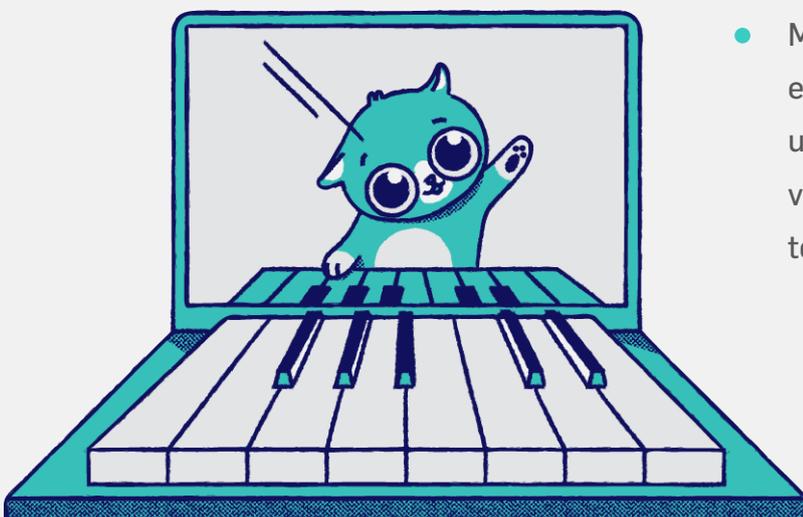
CONNECT WITH YOUR STUDENTS' LIVES  
AND **USE TECHNOLOGY.**

Use relevant metaphors for practice and interpretation.

- If you know your student plays soccer (see Tool #1: Be Proactive), use soccer practice metaphors to describe the importance of piano practice. Students understand that tennis, football and soccer players practice drills and techniques every day. They don't just play matches. This is a useful metaphor for describing the relevance of scales and arpeggios versus playing pieces.

If you're going to use technical exercises with teenagers:

- Make sure they know why they are playing them. What is the purpose of practising scales? Arpeggios? Hanon? Can you articulate a convincing argument? You'll need it!
- **Make sure the exercises are immediately relevant to the context of the pieces they are learning.** You'll get much less push-back and more practice if technical exercises are relevant to the music they want to play. For example, if a student is learning a great piece of film music (check out Hans Zimmer's scores!) and it has lots of octaves in the right hand, suggest some octave exercises.



- Make sure you make technical exercises as fun as possible. If you're going to use scales, check my article and videos about using the [MusiClock app](#) to motivate and inspire.

## Teens will respond instantly to the use of technology in piano teaching.

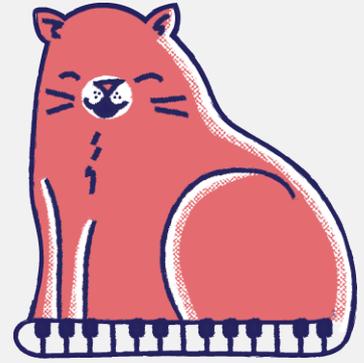
- If you don't currently use technology in your studio, take the time this year to explore the possibilities and seek out training. Your time and money will not be wasted. There are lots of technology help videos in the [Top Music Pro Academy](#). Join today at [topmusicpro.com](http://topmusicpro.com).
- Also check out my blog for articles about how to use technology in your teaching. eg. Articles like [Best iPad apps for piano teachers](#), which is one of my top posts. Head to [topmusic.co/blog](http://topmusic.co/blog).

### Other apps I use regularly with teens:

- [Piano Maestro](#)
  - [MusiClock](#)
  - [iReal Pro](#)
  - [Chord Tracker](#)
  - [Garageband](#)
- Encourage them to use their phones in lessons for research, recording performances or recording one part (eg. chords/bass lines) while they play another (also great for recording the teacher part of a duet for them to play along with).



# Tip # 5: Be yourself.

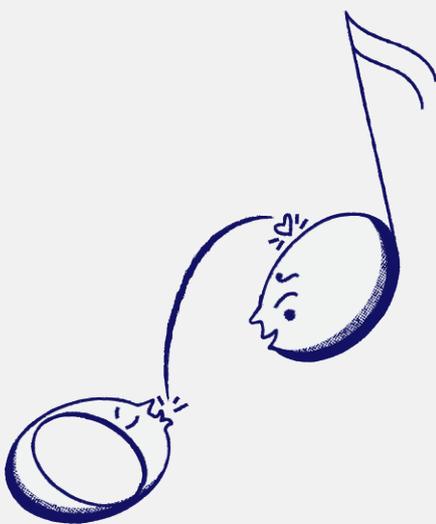


Not everyone is instantly going to enjoy (or be good at) inspiring teenagers.

- I think this is perhaps most important tip of all. Be authentic: children are great at picking a fake. If some of the above ideas are not "you", then vary them to suit your personality, age, lifestyle and teaching style. Try new ideas, but don't change who you are.

## Know your strengths.

- If you get great results from teaching 4 year olds, but your teenage or adult students don't seem to hang around very long, try to incorporate some of the above ideas.
- If teaching teens is not your thing and you genuinely don't enjoy it, please don't do it. Know when to hand students over to other teachers and work on finding your best niche.



## Have fun.

- Make sure you have regular holidays and always schedule non-teaching days in the week. Teachers working 6 or even 7 days a week have little or no time to recharge. It's also harder to improve your practice because you have so little time for conferences, courses, talking to other teachers, practising, finding and playing new music, blog reading or just chilling-out.
- In my opinion, teaching 80+ students or well over 40 hours a week is neither healthy, nor productive. **One-on-one teaching is incredibly draining – give yourself the time to recover.**

# What Now?

Think about the teens that you teach: are any of them losing motivation? Could you connect with any of them better? Did any of the above teaching tools strike a chord with you?

If you know your teaching could do with an upgrade, why don't you try out some new things in your studio this week?

**Just take one of these suggestions and incorporate it into your teaching.**

For example, perhaps you realise that you could "Be Cool" (Tool #3) by helping kids learn music they've downloaded from the internet. Ask them to bring in a piece of music they like. Even if it's a pretty badly transcribed online arrangement, go through it with them in their lesson and work out how to play it together. Show you're interested. Even if you only spend a couple of weeks on it and they only learn the first line melody, they'll appreciate your effort and approach.

If you want more details on how I go about engaging teenagers or would like to see me in action, please head to my blog [Topmusic.co](https://topmusic.co) and explore the many articles on cool repertoire that inspires, using technology and watch teaching videos to see how I put ideas into practice.

If you want to go deeper with this style of teaching, then you're going to love the training and the community of teachers that are part of [Top Music Pro](https://topmusicpro.com). Join today at [topmusicpro.com](https://topmusicpro.com).

I look forward to seeing you there!