

Make-up Music Lessons from an Economist's Point of View

by Vicky Barham, Ph. D.

I'm a parent of children enrolled in Suzuki music lessons. I'd like to explain to other parents why I feel - quite strongly, actually - that it is unreasonable of we parents to expect our teachers to make up lessons we miss, even if I know as well as they do just how expensive lessons are, and, equally importantly, how important that weekly contact is with the teacher to keeping practicing ticking along smoothly. I think that it is natural for we parents to share the point of view that students should have their missed lessons rescheduled, but if we were to 'walk a mile' in our teachers' shoes, we might change our minds about what it is reasonable for us to expect of our teachers. Like many parents, I pay in advance for lessons each term. In my mind, what this means is that I have reserved a regular spot in the busy schedules of my sons' teachers. I understand — fully — that if I can't make it to the lesson one week (perhaps my son is sick, or we are away on holiday, or there is some other major event at school) then we will pay for the lesson, but that my teacher is under no obligation to find another spot for me that week, or to refund me for the untaught lesson. And this is the way it should be.

In my “other life” I am an economist and teach at our local university. Students pay good money to attend classes at the university; but if they don't come to my lecture on a Monday morning, then I am not going to turn around and deliver them a private tutorial on Tuesday afternoon. When I go to the store and buy groceries, I may purchase something that doesn't get used. Days or months later, I end up throwing it out. I don't get a refund from the grocery store for the unused merchandise. If I sign my child up for swimming lessons at the local pool, and s/he refuses to return after the first lesson, I can't get my money back. So there are lots of situations in our everyday lives where we regularly pay in advance for goods or some service, and if we end up not using what we have purchased, we have to just “swallow our losses.” On the other hand, if I purchase an item of clothing, and get home and change my mind, I can take it back and expect either a refund or a store credit.

So why do I believe that music lessons fall into the first category of “non-returnable merchandise,” rather than into the second case of “exchange privileges unlimited” (which I think is one of the advertising slogans of an established women's clothing store!)? Speaking now as an economist, I would claim that the reason is that items like clothing are “durable goods” — meaning, they can be returned and then resold at the original price — whereas music lessons are non-durable goods — meaning, once my Monday slot at 3:30 is gone, my

son's teacher can't turn around and sell it again. The only way she would be able to give him a lesson later in the week would be if she were to give up time that she had scheduled for her own private life; and that seems pretty unreasonable. I can't think of many employees who would be thrilled if their bosses were to announce that they couldn't work from 3:30 to 4:30 this afternoon, but would they please stay until 6:30 on Thursday, because there will be work for them then!

Many teachers hesitate to refuse our request to shift lesson times (because our busy schedules do change), because unless they keep us parents happy, we will decide to take our child somewhere else for lessons (or to drop musical study), and they will lose part of their income. This is particularly true in areas with lower average income, where it can be particularly difficult to find students. So rather than telling us that 'well, actually, the only time when I'm not teaching and that you can bring your son for lesson is during the time I set aside each week to go for a long soul-cleansing walk, and I can't do that on Monday at 3:30 when you should have turned up', they agree to teach us at a time that really doesn't suit their schedule. Teachers who are 'nice' in this way often, in the long run, end up exhausted, and feeling exploited; they try to draw a line in the sand. However, too few parents ask to switch only when absolutely necessary, and too many parents want lesson times when it suits them this week, which is not the same time that suited last week. If the conflict arises because my child is in the School play, and they have their dress-rehearsal during his lesson time, then I feel that I must choose between the two activities, and if he attends the dress rehearsal my private lesson teacher doesn't owe me anything.

During May, my eldest son will be missing three lessons because he is going to accompany me on a trip to New Zealand to visit his great-grandparents. I do not expect my son's teacher to refund me for those missed lessons, or to reschedule them by 'doubling up' lessons in the weeks before or after our departure. Since there will be lots of advanced notice, I might ask her to consider preparing a special 'practice tape' for that period, or to answer my questions via e-mail, but if she doesn't have the time (the second half of April is going to be really busy for her, and she wouldn't be able to do the tape until more or less the week we left) and so has to refuse, then that's fine. I certainly don't expect her to credit me with three make-up lessons; there is no way for her to find a student to fill a three-week hole in her schedule during our absence. Instead, I hope that she will enjoy the extra hour of rest during those three weeks, and that we will all feel renewed enthusiasm when we return to lessons at the end of the trip.

© Copyright 2001 by Vicky Barham

Used with permission for Joy Morin's course at institute.joymorin.com.