

North Shore Leisure

Calendar	C12-C13
Classifieds	C18-C32
Cooking	C11
Gardening	C10
Kids	C14-C15
Father Frank	C5

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DAVID TABACHNICK with the tools of his trade.

Photo by Ray Ellis

Talking with the piano man

BY
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As the piano gets ready to celebrate its 300th birthday, two California researchers have statistical evidence to support what parents have believed all along: Music lessons are beneficial for children. The recently released results of a two-year study by Dr. Frances Rauscher and Dr. Gordon Shaw show that music lessons improve scholastic performance.

Piano tuner David Tabachnick always knew that.

"Music helps instill a logical order to things in life," said Tabachnick, a former professional piano player and current president of the Suffolk County Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild. "There is a real discipline in counting the measures in a beat. You can't turn a five beat measure into a three beat measure. If you don't do it right, it doesn't sound right. Notes just don't come out of the clear blue. The beginning, middle and end all have to add up to the big picture, which is that particular piece of music. Developing this skill greatly helps children with math and other general skills."

According to the Rauscher/Shaw study, the spatial reasoning performance of preschool children who received music lessons far exceeded the spatial reasoning performance of a demographically comparable group of students who did not receive music lessons. Well-developed spatial intelligence is described in the study as "the ability to perceive the visual world accurately, to form mental images of physical objects and to recognize variations of objects." The researchers theorize that spatial reasoning abilities are crucial for such higher brain functions as complex mathematics and science problems.

However, Tabachnick cautions parents against starting children at the piano too young. "The optimum age, though it will vary with each individual child,

would be approximately seven years old," he said. "They should be fluent in basic language and math skills, such as addition and subtraction, because that is what is needed to interpret music."

Those getting a late start at the keyboard shouldn't be discouraged. "It is very easy to catch up," said Tabachnick. But, don't expect to be playing like a concert pianist right off the bat. Proficiency could take up to three years or more, just as it would to become fluent in another language.

Tabachnick recently came across a perfect example of an adult's enthusiasm to learn to play the piano. "A few months ago I had a customer in Huntington who is an extremely rich, eccentric, high-powered businessman. He went out and bought the best piano money could buy and he couldn't play a note." Tabachnick was called upon to check out the 100-year-old rebuilt Steinway before the man purchased it. The \$45,000 ornately carved instrument was perfectly tuned, said Tabachnick. "It was flawless and absolutely breathtaking. A new piano of a similar make would have cost approximately \$10,000, but this man wanted the best."

Another memorable piano that Tabachnick worked on was a \$75,000 one shipped out to the West Hampton Jewish Center from Manhattan for a performance by classical pianist Marvin Hamlisch about five years ago. The Bosendorfer Concert Grand was made in Vienna and was incredible to play, Tabachnick said. "But the best part of the job was getting to hang out all afternoon with Marvin Hamlisch. He's the nicest guy."

The year 2000, the International Year of the Piano, marks the 300th anniversary of the invention of the piano. To find out more about the piano keyboard, use your computer keyboard to visit the Piano Technicians Guild at <http://www.ptg.org>. You'll find useful information on the piano industry, advice on buying a piano, the history of the instrument and the variety of styles in which this instrument is available.



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—DAVID TABACHNICK, PRESIDENT,
SUFFOLK COUNTY CHAPTER, PIANO TECHNICIANS GUILD



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Page C7