

**Making the Transition to Ensembles:
new possibilities and responsibilities
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If your child has only done solo and duet performances, and has recently joined an ensemble, the change can be quite a shock. If their expectations are not in line with the realities of ensemble playing he may be tempted to leave an ensemble prematurely. What follows is my attempt to explain to both students and parents what the differences are between the two, and consequently, what expectations should be.

The analogy to sports teams is useful one here. An ensemble is like a team; as opposed to say a tennis player, who works on her own against one opponent. In sports the object is to win. In music the object is to perform music which is cohesive and musical. A soloist, or tennis player, has a different set of problems and opportunities to deal with than a member of an ensemble or baseball team. Ensembles, like sports teams, are complex organizations in which all players must not only have their individual skills and parts together; but also have a clear understanding of how to integrate their part musically into in the whole. As in sports there is a physical component to this as well as a mental one.

In a baseball game, each member of the team has a specific position to play. This means that they will sometimes be active in every play and sometimes not. Think of the difference between a pitcher and a right fielder. The pitcher starts every play. The fielder will sometimes simply wait for his role to be needed in active play. The fielder is as integral to the team as the pitcher, but not necessarily involved in every play. It is the same in an ensemble.

The drummer, bassist, guitarist and pianist are usually always playing. Sometimes they each play the role of accompanist, sometimes soloist. In the accompanist role the pianist and guitar player often take turns. They are collectively called "the rhythm section". Their primary job is to set up the groove and play the repeating chord progression of the tune. The chords give each tune its particular sound and flavor. The horn section plays melodies (often time harmonizing), maybe solos, and occasionally some nifty background lines. They don't play all the time but they play a critical part in the tune, just as the rhythm section does. The role of the soloist is analogous to the role of the batter. You try your best to "swing" and hit. Each chord is like a pitch. There are many types and each type requires a different strategy. So the more pitches/chords you understand, the better you'll do in dealing with them as they come at you.

For optimal performance of any ensemble to occur, **all** members must have their individual parts and respective skills **TOGETHER**. Ideally each student should be working on his or her parts and skills with a private teacher in between each ensemble meeting. One can't realistically expect a group of kids, who've never played or practiced together as a team, win every game. Every coach knows it takes team practice, team drills and individual practice to make a good team. It is the same with a newly formed student ensemble. Different goals, but same approach.

In ensembles the skills needed are many.

Here is a partial list of the skills one must have:

Good intonation, good rhythmic reading and interpretation, good listening ability, clear understanding of song form, familiarity with the notes on your instrument, knowledge of scales and modes and when to play what type at any given time, knowledge of how to read music, knowledge of how to spell the many chords you encounter, ability to keep track of measures and know where you are within the form, the ability to follow a conductor, the ability to read body language, the ability to play with varying dynamics.

The list goes on.

As one can see, it is a complex undertaking, especially if you're new to it. I hope this has helped the reader to align expectations of ensemble playing with the reality of ensemble playing. The reality is that playing in a musical group is actually really fun, when done right. There is no other experience quite like performing well with a group of musical peers. Like doing anything that is worthwhile doing, it takes time, effort and energy. When you pull off a great performance with your musical buddies you come to understand why the time and effort required to do it is worth making. In the meantime, you will develop skills that will serve you well your entire lifetime.