



## Piano Student Observation Reference Sheet

This reference sheet can help you recognize and record the student behaviors you might observe during a lesson - in particular, during a first lesson. You can ask parents for a history/profile of the student, but your actual observations will be the most accurate compass for the direction you can take the lesson.

This reference sheet also gives possible reasons for some of the behaviors observed and suggests what you can/should do about them (if anything). These are speculative and based on my experience.

Not all of the behaviors should be considered negative, and many of them are valuable windows into strategies that you can use with your student.

Many of these behaviors can be mitigated by setting the environment up to facilitate success in the first place. (see Module 3).

Note: We can't always know "why" a student engages in a particular behavior, and it's not our job to know why. These are simply suggestions that may address some puzzling or seemingly difficult situations that come up in lessons.



## Sensory Observations

### Covers ears often

Possibly over-sensitive to sound. Can provide headphones (see Module 3) and speak softly. Possibly resistant to new information due to rejection sensitivity, low self-confidence, motor difficulties. Possibly doesn't like whatever sound is currently being made - music could be out of tune, might not like timbre of your voice, song could be in a key other than the one they expect/want it to be in. Tolerance often builds over time.

### Visually defensive

This can look like: no eye contact, only wants to look at certain things under their control, fleeting peripheral glances, difficulty attending visually.

Never force to make eye contact - it's irrelevant for learning and possibly detrimental to their attention. If looking at sheet music, keep in mind that they may have a photographic memory and take in the whole page after looking at it only once. If motor skills are still developing, gently encourage them to look up at the page whenever necessary, but let them take their time.

### Looks off into space

Many students do not need to be looking at you/the activity in order to pay attention. Some students find it very challenging to integrate visual and auditory information at the same time. Keep instructing as usual. If this behavior is interfering with the activity, you can gently ask them to look. Sometimes it helps to explain why you want them to look. For example, "if you look at my hands, it'll be easier to copy what I do!" Also consider whether you can move the activity to their visual field, i.e. by holding the book lower/higher instead of placing it on the music stand. Combine visual information with auditory input (narrating what you write) and kinesthetic input (handwriting what you say while the student watches).

### Turns lights on/off

Could just be for fun, could be a ritual carried over from home or formed in your classroom, could be because they need more/less light. A dim environment is often best for teaching, so consider whether you can work with their preference.

### Stimming (physical)

(Note: this is not exclusively a sensory function. Can also be used for emotional/internal regulation). Stimming is an adaptive behavior. It should always be allowed and never be restricted, unless it is harmful to the self or others (have parents intervene with that). If it is interfering significantly with the lesson, try alternating short bursts of playing with short stim breaks. You can place plenty of opportunities for stimming in the environment (see Module 3). Also notice what seems to trigger it or when it happens. It may be that you need to change something about the environment to provide more or less stimulation (lights off, remove ambient noise, change texture of something). Stimming can also happen when there is a "lull" in instruction or activity - consider whether you're leaving too much "dead space" in the lesson.



## Sensory Observations (continued)

### Stimming (verbal)

Might need MORE input than what they're getting, might be trying to drown out too much input, or might be a routine (see "scripting" under communication/speech observations). Keep in mind that many students are capable of singing or stimming while fully paying attention to the task at hand. Carry on with instruction as usual. You can likely compete with a verbal stim by keeping your instruction fast and engaging, and not leaving "dead space" for stimming.

### Drawn to/repelled by certain textures

Drawn to: can you incorporate more of that into the lesson? For example, can they sit on a textured bath mat while they play, or go spend time on the fluffy carpet during a break?

Repelled by: Remove the item. If that's not possible, work away from it. Students may still fear/resist activities that involve those materials, even if after you've removed the material.

### Seeks pressure

This can look like: putting your hands on their body, asking for squeezes/massages, "crashing" into things, pressing piano keys very hard.

Deep pressure is a real need for some students and can be very beneficial. Allow them to have these needs met within reason and with parents' permission. See Module 3 for more pressure accommodations.

### Sensory exploration (mouthing, smelling, touching things/people)

Sometimes students must do this in order to understand their environment. Senses may not be properly integrated. Try to let them touch or smell things within reason. If mouthing a lot, can provide a "chewy" (module 3) or ask parents to bring one. If stopping them from mouthing, always explain why: "please don't put that in your mouth, because it doesn't taste good and that's how germs spread."



## Communication/Speech Observations

### Makes vocal sounds, approximates words, points, uses an AAC device, uses sign language

Remember that level of speech does NOT correlate to intelligence. All of these are valid forms of communication. Don't force the student to speak verbally. Resist the temptation to speak back in short sentence fragments. They likely still understand you whether they are able to speak fluidly or not. Use age-appropriate conversation. Combine words with visuals for very young children.

### Leads you/your hand to perform desired activity

Try to allow this. If the touch bothers you, say "I don't want you to touch me right now." If you are trying to fade out support, say, "I want you to try this by yourself now".

### Answers your questions after a long pause/delay

Leave extra time for processing. Some students can take up to 30-60 seconds to process what you said. Don't repeat yourself more than once and don't demand fast answers. Deliver only one concept at a time.

### Blurts out seemingly unrelated words

Instruct as usual. Also consider that the words may be related to the task in a way that isn't clear to you (personal connection for the student). If they insist on the word and you don't understand, ask the parents.

### Only uses words to express highly preferred needs/wants (iPad, cookie, bathroom, "all done")

Student might really be asking for that word, or might be a stim/habit/compulsive phrase. If request is reasonable/possible, grant it or incorporate it into a schedule. If compulsive, address it ONCE (i.e. "I don't have any cookies here", "it's not time for iPad right now, but you can talk to your mom about that after the lesson", "you just went to the bathroom before class," "you're not quite done yet, but you have \_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ on the schedule and then you'll be done!")

If repetitions continue, redirect. Don't keep repeating yourself or you'll risk creating a new ritual.

### "Scripting" (reciting songs or "scenes" from videos or previous life situations)

Carry on with instruction. As long as it's not harmful, you can let it happen. It may be very difficult for students to break out of a script. If possible, you can try tying the topic of the script into the current activity. If severely interfering with lesson, compete with the script by switching to an engaging activity. Eliminate opportunities to script by keeping the lesson moving along.



## Communication/Speech Observations (continued)

### Echolalia (repeats what you say, sometimes multiple times)

Carry on with instruction. This is usually not intentional. Ask them to demonstrate knowledge by showing or pointing instead of by giving a verbal response.

### When asked to choose between two options, always chooses the last one heard

This is usually not intentional. Ask them to demonstrate knowledge by showing or pointing instead of by giving a verbal response. Stay away from “dichotomous” (two possible answers) choices.

### Keeps saying “all done”

Could be a habit, could be a compulsion, could want to be done for whatever reason. Address it ONCE (i.e. “you’re not quite done yet, but you have \_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ on the schedule and then you’ll be done!”) Write a schedule and refer to it if repetitions continue.

### Yells loudly

Could be (a) avoiding work, could be (b) unintentional, could be (c) trying to regulate sensory input. If (a), will likely be “out of nowhere” during a quiet moment - carry on with instruction. If (b), carry on with instruction. If (c), will probably be combined with covering ears/running away - give them a minute and then carry on instruction quietly.

### Has speech rituals (i.e. every time they play a song, they have to announce the title and say “ready, set, go!”)

If not harming anyone, let them perform the ritual. If it’s not harming anyone, it’s usually fine to allow. It can be distressing to make them stop or interrupt them in the middle of a ritual.



## Movement Observations

### **Seeks movement (can't sit still, runs around room, explores every corner)**

Let them! Give them a few minutes to move around and familiarize themselves with the environment. Give frequent movement breaks throughout the lesson - write them on the schedule (Module 3) if necessary. Provide built-in opportunities for movement (Module 3)

### **Clumsy**

Keep the area clear of tripping/bumping hazards. Be ready to intervene when walking from place to place. Don't keep anything valuable within reach.

### **Seems "floppy" (leans, doesn't hold self up)**

Student may have weak core or motor challenges. With consent from them and the parents, physically demonstrate or support them to do the desired activity. Practice responding to a single verbal cue, such as "be big!" or "sit up." Acknowledge effort and success, even if it only lasts a few seconds. Strength and coordination will improve over time.

### **Destructive (bites erasers off of pencils, breaks objects apart, rips paper)**

May be intentional, may be sensory. Keep anything valuable out of reach. Consider whether there is something they CAN break/destroy, such as a piece of paper they can rip to shreds on a two-minute break. Keep them engaged with a fast-paced lesson, and eliminate lulls.

### **Rigid and forceful movements (i.e. can't play a key "gently", must bang or press hard)**

Could be sensory and/or a motor issue. Assume that they can't control their body, not that they are doing it on purpose. Consider whether it actually matters. With consent, guide hands through softer/slower motions. Often improves over time.

### **Swings feet/kicks piano/plays with pedals**

Make sure their feet have somewhere to rest (box or floor). Cover pedals with a box. Wrap a theraband around piano bench to keep feet occupied (see Module 3). Give a movement break.



## Movement Observations (continued)

### Lays on the floor

If not responding to requests to get up, bring the lesson to them. Sit on the floor and sing; bring an electric keyboard to them; bring books or worksheets; teach music history

### Does not move when asked to

They may not be able to, or may not want to. Respect bodily autonomy. Bring the lesson to them (see “lays on the floor”).

### Bangs hands/body parts on piano keys

May be sensory, may be unintentional. Can you let them bang? If not, say and write clear expectations for the way they treat the instrument. Provide something else they can “bang” on a break.

### Has “floaty” hands, can’t rest finger on the keys without help

Likely unintentional, could be a problem with proprioception (knowing where they are in space). With consent and desire, give physical hand support. Go through “spider hand” sequence (Module 6 - fine motor activities)

### Cannot isolate fingers

With consent and high motivation, give physical hand support (see Module 5). Or, demonstrate and ask to copy. Go through “spider hand” sequence (Module 6 - fine motor activities).

### Has rituals (i.e. every time they finish a song, they get up and run to the chair across the room)

If not harming anyone, let them perform the ritual. If it’s not harming anyone, it’s usually fine to allow. It can be distressing to make them stop or interrupt them in the middle of a ritual.



## Social Skill Observations

### Talks excessively

Keep a repertoire of phrases like “Let’s talk about piano right now”, “We can talk about that on a break or after your lesson”. If necessary, write down “talk about \_\_\_” on the schedule. Can also ignore and redirect.

### Says inappropriate things

Ignore and redirect in a calm, even voice. We’re not here to implement a behavior plan. A reaction from you, positive or negative, will make it a repeat occurrence.

### Asks frequent questions about unrelated topics (“What are you eating for dinner tonight? Which route did you take to drive here?”)

If time is appropriate (i.e. first 2 minutes of lesson or as they are packing up at the end), can answer questions or say “I don’t feel like talking about myself right now, let’s talk about piano”. Can write “ask question” on schedule and include a checkbox for each question allowed to ask

### Only wants to talk about own interests

Become familiar with those interests and work them into the lesson whenever possible. I.e. if it’s trains, you can sing songs about trains, make train sounds on piano, compose a song about trains, ask “how would this song sound if you heard it on a train?” etc.

### Asks questions about how everything works (especially the piano, construction outside, and other mechanical things)

Take the time to explain the mechanisms of a piano. Open it up and show them if you can. You can schedule 5 minutes about the beginning or end of each lesson to explore the “guts” of the piano. When it’s not an appropriate time to look or talk about that, refer them to the schedule.

### Only gives stock answers like “I AM GOOD HOW ARE YOU”

If speech is difficult, don’t ask open ended questions like “how are you” and “what did you practice?”. Just say “hey \_\_\_, it’s great to see you today!” or “show me how you play this”

### Hugs/kisses parent often (or asks for hugs/kisses often)

Can be an impulse/ritual or a tactic to avoid work. They likely don’t NEED to get a hug from parent every 30 seconds, so ask parent to step out or tell them that they will get a hug after class. Keep instruction fast-paced and engaging so the student doesn’t have an opportunity to get distracted

### Gets distracted easily

Minimize visual clutter, keep distracting items out of sight, give one clear instruction at a time, switch activities frequently. Make a schedule (collaborate with student to choose activities, if possible). Adjust the demands of the activity (make it easier or harder)



## Emotional/Sensory Regulation Observations

### **Drawn to objects that move repetitively (looks at flags waving in the wind, moves fingers in front of eyes repetitively)**

This is a stim and is probably calming. Let them do it for awhile, and schedule in times they can do it. Acknowledge their needs by saying “I know you like to look at those flags outside. Let’s do one song, and then you can go look again.”

### **Moves body repetitively in some way (swinging head back and forth, rocking, flapping hands, flicking or tapping fingers)**

This is a stim and probably calming. If they can still play while doing it, no need to say anything or intervene. If they can’t play while doing it, say, “I know you like to move your body like that, and I also really want to hear you play some piano. Let’s play [one line of this song], and then you can do it again.”

### **Seems visibly upset (whines, cries, clings to parent)**

Try to prevent this in the first place by making a schedule and sticking to it. Activity may be too difficult OR too easy! If it’s already very easy, try making it harder. Tell them how much time is left in the activity or how many times they are going to do it, so they know it has an end. Give a timed break if necessary. Try to work through it no matter what. Refer to the handout “HASH SUCCEED”.

### **Strict adherence to internally or externally created schedule**

Have them make the schedule with you; try to stick to the schedule and avoid making unexpected changes. Give warnings before transitions or changes in the schedule. (See Module 3 - lesson flow tools)



## Emotional/Sensory Regulation Observations (continued)

### Difficulty with transitions (to/from car, between activities during lesson)

Always give a warning before you change the activity. Sing a transition song at the beginning, end, or in between activities. (See “song bank” for ideas). Use visual supports like timers and a schedule (See Module 3 - lesson flow tools). Give ample time to transition and don't rush them

### Self-harm (bites own hand, bangs head)

Refer to the parents to physically intervene. Note what was happening when they started doing this. Is the activity too easy or too difficult? Did you correct them? Did their parent talk about them in front of them? Acknowledge their feelings. Give them a break.

### Aggressive behavior towards others (bites, kicks, hits, pinches, scratches)

Remove yourself from physical proximity and don't let them make contact with you. Don't react emotionally in any way. Note what happened right before the behavior and try to avoid doing it in the future. If it can't be avoided, warn them before you do it. After the behavior, resume instruction as soon as possible as if nothing happened.

### Meltdown/tantrum

Note what happened right before the behavior and try to avoid doing it in the future. If it can't be avoided, warn them before you do it. (See Module 8 - Common Challenges)



## Musical Observations

### Seems uninterested in the piano

May not express emotion in expected ways. Carry on with instruction. If student moves away from piano, try to transition them back, or bring the lesson to them. Try to find at least one preferred musical activity - singing, using other instruments like guitar or percussion, music apps (see “resource list”), reading/singing a singalong book, or pull up a song on Youtube.

### Covers ears when you play piano or sing

Possibly over-sensitive to sound, but possibly resistant to new/non-preferred information. Tell them what to expect by making a schedule and warning them before you play, what you are going to play and how long it will last. Also try playing in other keys and talking to them about transposition.

Possibly doesn't like whatever sound is currently being made - music could be out of tune, might not like the timbre of your voice, or the song could be in a key other than the one they expect/want it to be in. Tolerance often builds over time.

### Sings spontaneously

Let them! Try to catch the melody and sing it back. Show them how it sounds on the piano. Talk about what key it's in (“you just sang that in E Major!”) and show them how it sounds in other keys. Harmonize it, improvise on it, compose a song out of it.

### Sings or hums a particular riff

Some students have their own “theme song” that they always come back to. This can be a sign of perfect pitch (see Module 4). Say “Oh, there's your theme song again!”. Play it on the piano. See if you can help them expand it by adding to it or changing it slightly.



## Musical Observations (continued)

### Explores keyboard spontaneously

Note what they do. If appropriate, explain what they just played in music theory terms. Mimic them and/or join in an improv duet.

### “Noodles” on piano, plays repetitive riffs spontaneously

Can be a sensory stim or muscle memory. If appropriate, explain what they just played in music theory terms. Mimic them and/or join in an improv duet. Try to help them expand on or slightly change what they did to build their motor skills and repertoire.

### Plays/sings back whatever they hear in tune

Has perfect pitch or a great ear. Don't play songs first for them when sight reading (see Module 4). Talk about transposition and expose them to the same tune in multiple keys - they will absorb the patterns effortlessly and probably thoroughly enjoy it.

### Is visibly pleased by patterns (loves to find groups of 2 and 3 black keys, smiles when you show them C position, demonstrates willingness to transpose)

Go with it! This student might have perfect pitch or at least a strong musical aptitude. Explain music theory behind what you are doing every chance you get. They will passively absorb a lot and never forget it. Challenge them as much as you can.

To learn more about assessing a student for perfect pitch, see Module 4.