

Choosing an instrument shouldn't be taken lightly

By JENNIFER COLTON

From the accordion to the xylophone or, more likely, the drums to the violin, helping a child choose a musical path can be overwhelming. Should a child choose an instrument based on size? Sound? Should band win out over choir or orchestra because that's where her friends are?

Sometimes, age and size can be a factor — can a child extend a trombone or reach the pedals on a piano — but in general music educators say the choice should be about one thing: love.

"The most important thing is to pick an instrument that the student loves! Learning an instrument takes a lot of hard work and if the student is not motivated to put in the hours, it doesn't matter how many physical advantages they have," says Dan Allen, music teacher at Sandstone Middle School in Hermiston. "Some people subscribe to certain physical aspects being advantageous to certain instruments — I don't rely on that. There are plenty of great flute players with teardrop lips, bassoon players with small hands, and brass players with extreme overbites. If the student is motivated, they'll figure it out."

Andy Cary teaches choir, band, and instrumental music for the Pendleton School District. He agrees on letting the student lead. "When it comes time to learn an instrument, just encourage. You don't say, 'Oh, I look at you and I think you look like a tuba player' or 'I think you're a trumpet player.' You go with what they feel like they're passionate about," he said.

Finding an instrument a student loves sounds like a great idea, but how do parents figure that out? To



start with, you listen. Allen recommends the Army band's introduction to instruments of the band video on YouTube or going to a music store and trying a couple instruments to see which ones a student would be most excited about taking home.

"Listen to music and find out what sounds you're drawn to," suggests Zach Banks, director of education for the Oregon East Symphony. "If you really love the way the violins sing that melody, you may want

to try a violin. If you love those low tones, you may want to try a bass or cello. Ask yourself, 'What about this music I'm hearing makes me want to play it?'"

Many students in Umatilla and Morrow counties will have an experience with orchestral instruments through school. The Oregon East Symphony's Symphony Strings program begins working with students in the Pendleton School District in fourth grade, and Inland Northwest Musicians typically host a Young



Strategies

People's Concert once a year in both Hermiston and the Wallowa Valley, inviting students from the region to a concert with an introduction to the sounds of each instrument and how they work together. Often they have a "Symphony Safari" where students can get up close with the instruments.

R. Lee Friese, music director of Inland Northwest Musicians, says a large part of their mission is making music accessible to everyone, regardless of income, geographic location, or age. Presenting the instruments can open children to different options.

Instrument "petting zoos," where students can have a trial run, are another option offered in some areas.

"It never hurts to try everything out once," Banks says. "Get your hands on a violin or a cello or a viola. Until you play it, it's really hard to know what's a good fit for you."

Biggs says it's also important to remember that how a child looks should not dictate the instrument. For parents, that means encouragement.

"If someone wants to play an instrument, don't say 'oh, no, no, no, you probably want to play this,' Cary said. "If parents are trying to help, if a child comes up and says, 'Mom, I want to play trumpet,' say 'Great!'"

Cary recommends young musicians or singers begin by learning the piano because it will teach components of music, as well as the