

Chapter 2. The Technique* Playing and Teaching

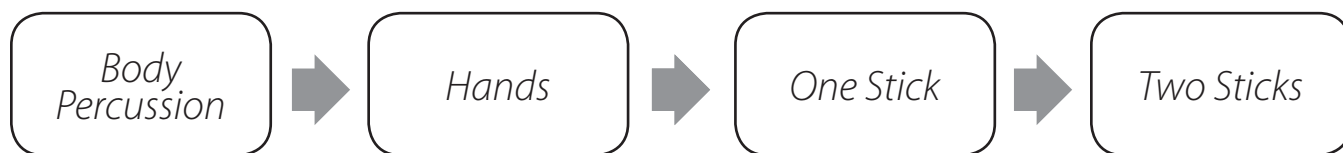
Hitting a bucket with a stick is easy. Doing it the same way twice, rapidly, or to a steady beat is a bit trickier. The goal of this chapter is to get students to move their hands in a coordinated manner. In other words, these activities and exercises should help students make their hands do what they want them to do. The following material can be used as an introduction to playing with sticks, as a daily warm-up, or for building coordination skills.

But first, a major question needs to be addressed:

When are students ready to drum with sticks?

Playing buckets successfully with hands, chanting rhythm patterns, and playing body percussion accurately are indicators that a student is ready to play with sticks. Most importantly, a student must be able to move his or her body in a coordinated manner. Marching while patting and clapping in duple and triple meter, and echo-playing/chanting rhythm patterns with hands on knees while moving to a steady beat are excellent indicators that a student will be successful with sticks.

It is effective to follow this progression when preparing students for success:



The following material is divided into five parts: *Beginning Activities*, *Echo Activities*, *Technique Exercises*, *Sequencing*, and *Troubleshooting*. The first part includes initial activities to get students comfortable using sticks; the second part includes relevant echo activities; the third part teaches students to physically handle a pair of sticks with skill; the fourth part outlines a possible progression of these activities and exercises; and the fifth part addresses common challenges that arise and how to address them.

Note: Since playing with two sticks requires more readiness for students to be successful compared to the shaker, the bottle, and the scratcher, technique exercises for the latter instruments are omitted. However, please feel free to adapt these exercises for those instruments.

Beginning Activities

No matter what the age group or class type, students should first be taught how to hold a pair of sticks and what to do with the sticks when they aren't playing. Spending the time teaching and reinforcing this at the beginning of the unit pays off big time later.

How to Hold Sticks

Holding a pair of sticks is not complicated, but it is important to achieve consistent technique throughout the entire ensemble. This step-by-step process effectively teaches students how to hold sticks:

1. Hold a pair of real sticks in ready position (hands out front).
2. The students pretend to hold a pair of imaginary sticks.
3. Ask the students to look at and copy your technique.

*Visit TheBucketBook.com to view video performances of examples from this chapter.

4. Inspect and correct the students' hand positions using this checklist:
 - a. Thumb on side
 - b. Fingers wrapped around
 - c. Back of hand facing up
5. Repeat the process (steps 1–4) using real sticks.

As an example of how to hold sticks, look at the image “Holding a Pair of Sticks” on page 9.

Resting, Ready, and Relaxed Positions

The resting, ready, and relaxed positions are just as important for students to learn as holding a pair of sticks. You can teach these positions with or without sticks. Refer to the images on page 12.

1. Demonstrate resting position.
2. The students imitate.
3. Correct the students.
4. Repeat the process for the next two positions.
5. Call out the name of a position while demonstrating.
6. The students quickly go into the position called.
7. Repeat and mix up the different positions.
8. Call out the name of a position *without* demonstrating.
9. The students go to that position.

Stick Mirror

Before they are introduced to buckets, it's a good idea to give students experience moving the sticks around in space. The following activities do just that and can be done with one or two sticks. For very new beginners, the activities can also be done with “imaginary sticks.”

Stick mirror is a technique challenge disguised as a game. Activities that involve pairs of students mirroring each other are used throughout music education and are especially useful for the development of stick technique.

The goal of the game is to take proper stick motion out of the drumming context and provide students with more experience moving the stick. Here are a few ideas:

1. The students face you and hold one stick in ready position with proper technique.
2. Instruct students that they are to be your mirror. If you move your stick high, the students move their sticks high, and so on.
3. Go through several motions while the students mirror.
4. Refine your motions to only include movement of the wrist, as if you are playing an imaginary drum.
5. Repeat with students in pairs: one student is the “teacher,” and one is the “mirror.”

Remember that students should drum with their wrists rather than their arms. Throwing the resting, ready, and relaxed positions into the game can reinforce those skills as well. The game is silent (this is especially useful for younger students)!

Zip Sticks

Playing a bucket feels different than playing a drum that has a plastic head. When a stick hits a drum, it bounces or rebounds, sending the stick back in the direction it came from. This allows for quick, relaxed playing. However, when a stick hits a bucket, it doesn't do much at all. In fact, it usually only bounces two or three times and only an inch off the bucket at the most. This makes playing a bucket to be physically more work.

Like *Stick Mirror*, *Zip Sticks* is a technique challenge disguised as a game and is aimed at remedying this “no rebound” situation. It teaches students to use their wrists to pull their sticks up as fast as they can. This motion compensates for the lack of rebound from the bucket.

Zip Sticks

Part 1 (Silent)

1. Students go to ready position with stick tips touching their legs.
2. Count down out loud: “3, 2, 1.”
3. After “1,” students “zip” both sticks straight up using only their wrists.
4. Students return their sticks to the ready position from step 1.
5. Count down again.
6. Repeat 5–10 times, varying the speed of the countdown.

Part 2 (One Sound)

1. Start at the ending position of Part 1, with stick tips in the air.
2. Repeat the steps of Part 1. Students now “zip” their sticks down, hit their legs, and then “zip” the stick tips back up into the starting position. There are two “zips” here: one down, one up.
3. Repeat 5–10 times, varying the speed of the countdown.



Zip Sticks:
Part 1 Starting Position



Zip Sticks:
Part 1 Finished Position and Part 2 Starting Position

Suggestions and Variations:

- Add buckets and point sticks at the rim instead of the leg.
- Have contests to see who can zip their sticks up the fastest.
- Instead of saying the countdown, have a student leader count down.
- Have students look at another student and try to beat them at zipping the sticks up.
- Vary the speed of the countdown. This keeps the students on their toes.
- Have students repeat Part 1 and Part 2 but zip their sticks low. The stick should only come up three inches from the rim or leg. This improves accuracy while playing quietly.
- *Zip Sticks* also works well for increasing rhythmic accuracy when playing on the side of the bucket. Simply zip the sticks sideways instead of “up.”
- Use imaginary sticks.

Zip Sticks will help students learn to move the stick with their wrists and to “zip” or “pull up” quickly—it will teach them what a proper stroke should look and feel like. If a student has used their forearms instead of wrists, it will look like they are responding to the police command: “Come out with your hands up!” Later in the unit, you can use this feeling of “zipping” to encourage sluggish hands to pull up quicker. This will in turn improve rhythmic accuracy. Use the phrase “zip your sticks faster” to help students mentally recall what a proper stroke feels like.

Echo Activities

Echo activities help students learn how to move sticks comfortably and present isolated patterns that occur in modes like the Unison and One Bucket Groove. Now that the *Stick Mirror* and *Zip Sticks* activities have given students some experience moving sticks, it is time to create some sound. Try using some of the following activities in addition to any echo activities the students already know.

Note: For any echo activity, students should chant using either a neutral syllable or rhythm syllables as they play the rhythm. This is extremely important for rhythm development. Also, make sure to provide a steady beat to which students are moving their bodies the entire time.

Floor, Leg, Chair

Floor, Leg, Chair is a particularly useful echo activity for introducing sticks. Like the name suggests, each student echoes rhythm patterns using the floor, his or her leg, and a chair as instruments. It is a one-stick activity, and buckets are not used.

1. Perform a rhythm pattern on the *floor*.

2. Students echo the rhythm pattern on the *floor* with their sticks.
3. Perform a rhythm pattern (either the same or a different one) on your *leg*.
4. Students echo the rhythm pattern on their *legs* with their sticks.

5. Perform a rhythm pattern (again, same or different) on a *chair*.
6. Students echo the rhythm pattern on their *chairs* with their sticks.
7. Repeat the whole process, switching the stick to the other hand and varying the rhythm.

If you notice students having difficulty, play several rhythm patterns in a row on each surface. Because students are only using one stick, this activity gives them practice aiming at different targets.

Why the floor? It's an excellent first target for a stick, since it is almost impossible to miss.

Why the leg? Students quickly realize what it feels like to play too loudly. If a student complains that the stick stings their leg, teach them how to keep their sticks low. This gives you an opportunity to teach dynamics while using the terms "sticks high" and "sticks low" for *forte* and *piano*. Refer back to the stinging leg experience later, when students are playing too loudly on their buckets.

Why a chair? It allows for finer visual targeting of the stick.

Basic Echo Activities for Technique

Echo activities are particularly useful for isolating specific technical challenges. When introducing buckets, use a variety of echo activities at the beginning of each class to introduce specific technical challenges including:

- Stickings: right, left, both, and alternate
- Moving the stick between different tones
- Sticks high and sticks low
- Zipping low
- Accents
- Zipping sideways
- *Crescendo* and *diminuendo*
- Upstrokes and downstrokes

These are listed in no particular order. If your students are having difficulty with a particular skill, toss one of the elements above into your lesson plan. These technical and musical issues could also be addressed individually, outside of echo patterns during a lesson. This is the basic echo template:

The image shows a musical score for an echo activity in 2/4 time. It is divided into two parts: 'Teacher' and 'Students'. The 'Teacher' part has four measures: the first measure contains three quarter notes; the second measure contains two quarter notes followed by a quarter rest; the third and fourth measures each contain a single quarter rest. The 'Students' part also has four measures: the first two measures each contain a single quarter rest; the third measure contains three quarter notes; and the fourth measure contains three quarter notes.

Air, Body, Floor, Bucket

Air, Body, Floor, Bucket is similar to *Floor, Leg, Chair*, but it differs in two notable ways:

1. It uses only one rhythm pattern at a time, with students echoing the pattern four times in a row without interruption; and
2. Students use two sticks instead of one.

The activity effectively teaches students new rhythm patterns.

1. Perform a rhythm pattern on a bucket.
2. Students echo the rhythm pattern with their sticks by:
 - a. waving in the air (air drumming)
 - b. hitting their knees or legs
 - c. hitting the floor
 - d. hitting the bucket

Only one of the above steps involves students actually playing on the bucket itself. Not only does this reduce volume, but it also gives students an inconspicuous way to practice alternating the sticks.

What is “air drumming,” and why is it useful? When students “air drum,” they aim at an imaginary drum in front of the torso and move their sticks as they pretend to play it. It is silent with the exception of chanting. Air drumming is actually quite challenging, because it requires students to make a decision about where their sticks should stop. This additional step is a powerful tool in training students to use sticks accurately.

Initially, demonstrate for the students and play along with each step until students are familiar with the sequence. You can then lead the group by clapping, chanting with a neutral syllable or rhythm syllables, or playing a different instrument. This activity can also be completed using hands or imaginary sticks.