

Choosing a Guitar For Liberty Tuning

In theory, the *Liberty Guitar Method* works for any guitar, but some types have specific advantages and disadvantages. If you already have a guitar, you can start using it right away. If you have not picked one out yet, or if are renting or borrowing, you will find this discussion helpful and it might affect your choice.

FOR ADULTS

The *Liberty Capo* takes up the first 4 frets of a guitar fingerboard, which means that using an instrument with only 12 frets to the body puts you at a disadvantage. Because most of the chords that beginners will be playing only use 2 fingers, there are some great chords higher up the neck that are not any harder to play than chords down low. The biggest problem comes when you add a full capo below the *Liberty Capo*, which happens a lot when you play guitar to accompany songs. **The best choice of a guitar for the *Liberty* method has both a 14-fret neck and a “cutaway” body shape.**

FOR CHILDREN

The *Liberty Guitar Method* solves several problems in teaching guitar to children. (There are several books of easy songs for children planned for the *Liberty Guitar* series.) Traditionally, children have not been able to start playing guitar chords until the age of 12 or 13 when their hands are larger and strong enough. For children to play campfire-style guitar, some programs use open-tuned guitars, which causes a new set of problems. Open tunings are very limiting in what keys and chords you can play in, and only certain songs sound right.

Guitar programs for younger children have needed to involve either single-note melody (not realistic for most people), electric guitars with much lighter strings (not really troubadour/campfire-type guitars), or smaller-scale instruments, that also have a set of thorny problems.

The *Suzuki* guitar method uses smaller-scale instruments tuned to standard pitch as an extension of the classical guitar sight-reading guitar, but it has almost nothing musically in common with campfire strumming. Millions of people strum their guitars and

sing songs, and a very small number of people play instrumental classical guitar. The *Liberty Guitar Method* offers the first viable alternative to a strict, rote music program for young children. Instead of playing single notes instrumentally, it offers young children a chance to play recreational guitar to accompany songs or even to accompany other instruments like the fiddle, mandolin or banjo.

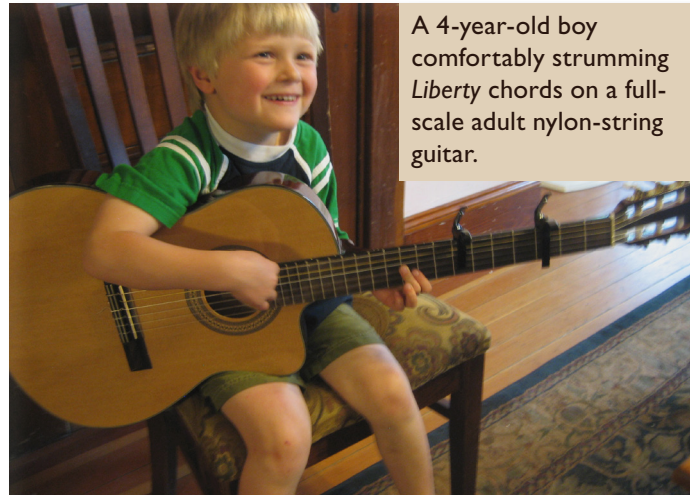
There are inherently unsolvable problems with smaller guitars that make them vastly less useful than child-size violins, which seem to work fine in *Suzuki* programs. Small guitars may even cause children to reject the idea of playing guitar, because

they can't press the strings down or get a good sound from the guitar. This is less of a problem with nylon-string children's guitars, since the strings are inherently much easier to fret than steel.

When they have shorter string lengths, instruments require thicker strings in order to be able to tune them to standard pitch. Normal strings tuned to normal pitch will cause short-scale instruments to have very slack tension, and they will have little tone and even intonate poorly.

Strings that a child is strong enough to press down will be very loose and have little tone, and making them thicker to give them more tone increases string tension, and thus makes them physically harder to play. The short scale length also magnifies the guitar's innate intonation problems. Small, inexpensive guitars with strings that are not too tight for a child to press down will almost certainly have a poor sound compared to an adult instrument, and they may also be impossible to play in tune and difficult for even a skilled guitarist to enjoy.

Now that the *Suzuki* guitar method has become more established, children's guitars and strings (sometimes called “Kinder”) are sold using fractional numbers like the violins and cellos: 1/4, 1/2, 3/4 and 4/4 are used to indicate what scale of instrument they are intended for. A 1/4 (not really one-fourth the size...) is for a very young child and 4/4 means a full scale adult instrument. These scaled-size strings are only available in nylon strings, though it is possible to buy single



A 4-year-old boy comfortably strumming *Liberty* chords on a full-scale adult nylon-string guitar.

strings or custom sets of steel strings in almost any gauge (thickness).

This is confusing. You would naturally think that children should have thinner strings than normal, so they are easier to press down. Unfortunately, the short scale of children's guitars requires thin strings to be very loose in tension at concert pitch, to the point here they are not rewarding musically. The only way to get thinner strings to behave is to tune them above normal pitch until they have some tone, and then hope that it is not totally confusing to be playing in different keys because the guitar is tuned up. What feels like an E chord might actually be an F[#] or G. The tighter strings then are harder to press down, which defeats the purpose of thinner strings.

Using the *Liberty Guitar Method*, a young child can enjoy the fuller tone of an adult-size instrument, play easy chords, and sing in keys that are suitable for children's voices. Almost no one has ever heard a young child strum chords and sing songs.

Children's voices are commonly pitched to sing songs in the keys of B^b, B, and C, which are usually not easy to play in beginner guitar. Luckily, the *Liberty Guitar Method* makes it easy to play many kinds of songs in all three of these keys with only 2 fingers, on a full-sized guitar.

Because these chords are high up the neck (due to 2 capos) the length of the full-size guitar fingerboard does not matter. In fact, because the frets get logarithmically closer together as you go up the neck, *Liberty* chord shapes on an adult guitar are significantly shorter than a children's guitar with no capo, and easier and better-sounding than ukulele chords.

If you already have a short-scale children's guitar, tune it 2 or 3 frets sharp and it works great with the *Liberty Capo*.

The tighter strings will give it the best possible tone, and the higher pitch avoids the need to add a full capo below the *Liberty Capo*. If you tune up 3 frets (so the low

string is a G) then a *Liberty Capo Version 1* will allow you to play in the key of C, perfect for kids and great for adults too.

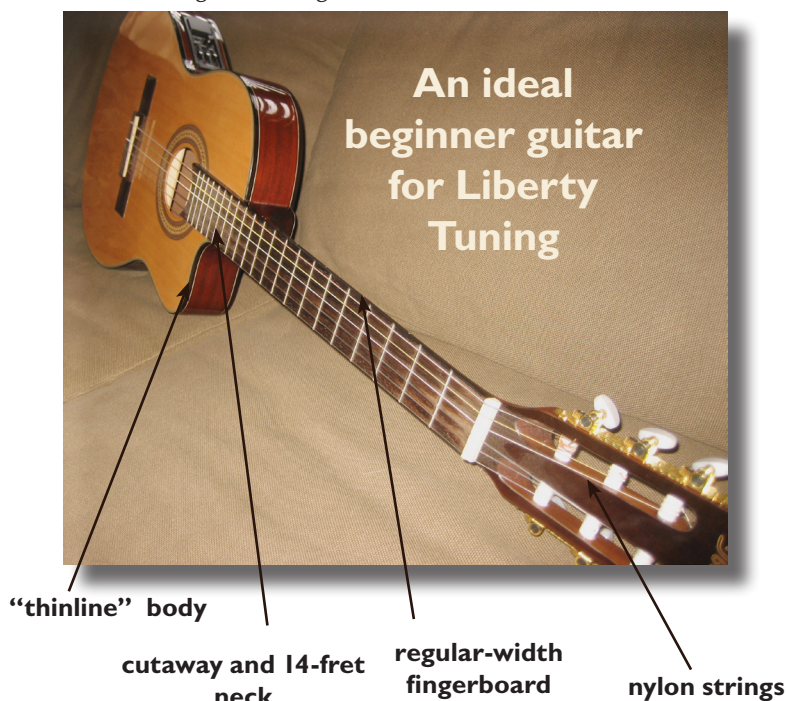
The ideal guitar at this writing (2014) for family music is Model GA5-CTE currently made by *Ibanez* (photo) It is inexpensive, well-made, attractive and it has these key features:

- 1) a thin (called "*thinline*") body— so kids can hold it
- 2) a 14-fret neck plus a cutaway –vital fingerboard room for double capos
- 3) Nylon strings on a standard-width (1 13/16") neck –unlike most nylon-string guitars that

have very wide (2") fingerboards. Standard nylon-string guitars also have very thick necks, which are especially hard for children.

The *Ibanez* also has a nice pickup system built in, though it sounds fine played "unplugged."

A slightly more expensive model of this same guitar called the GA35-TCE also has a dark wine-colored finish, a strap button, fingerboard dots and a built-in electronic tuner, which also make it



ideal for family guitar.

A number of other companies also make smaller-body, cutaway, 14-fret nylon-string acoustic guitars. We recorded a lot of our tracks with a Taylor model 314 nylon-string to show that the songs can sound good with a guitar that is easy to play for all.

If you tune a normal guitar down 2 frets or if you have a long-scale or baritone guitar, you gain the best access *Liberty Tuning* offers to the key of D. Since *Liberty* plays mostly in E and A, the only way to play in D is to use *Version 1* and put a full capo at fret 5. This ties up a huge amount of the fingerboard, and gives a thin sound.

Tuning down allows you to play in E position and sound in D with a rich low bass. If D is an important key for you to play and sing in, you might want to consider doing this.