

The Secret (Little Jennifer's Secret) of How to Play Clear Barre Chords

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Having trouble getting your barres to sound clear and clean? Do you think your fingers are too small or that you are just too much of a wuss to get a good barre? Let me tell you the story of "Little Jennifer".

"Little Jennifer" was a student of mine many years ago. Jennifer was seven years old, small frame, small hands, kind of skinny--but just a normal little girl. But she played the guitar quite well and was able to play barre chords with no problem.

At the same time, I had a student, "Big Dennis". Dennis was in his thirties, a well-built, very strong guy who was learning to play barre chords. But his barre chords buzzed and the effort he exerted was considerable. I thought, "Now wait a minute, what is going on here. Little Jennifer can play barre chords with ease and Big Dennis can't. What does Little Jennifer know that Big Dennis doesn't?"

Well folks, here is Little Jennifer's secret. **Little Jennifer knew intuitively to use her ARM STRENGTH to hold down a barre.** She had little strength in her left hand.

To hold down a barre, you pull the guitar lightly against your chest with both arms. No, you aren't going to pull as hard as you can--just enough to hold the barre. You will not harm or affect your guitar in any way! But don't practice this concept by holding a full barre all by itself. Keep reading, and see below how to practice. **YOU DO NOT USE THE THUMB** and fingers to squeeze the guitar neck. Those thumb muscles are relatively weak and get fatigued fairly quickly. But the arm muscles are strong (even in a little child) and once developed will not tire easily. The thumb is just there to stabilize the left hand and channel or direct the brute strength of the arms to the hand and fingers. **IT IS A PASSIVE, NOT ACTIVE** participant in playing the guitar, **ESPECIALLY** barre chords.

Once again, you use your arm strength to hold the barre. Pull the guitar lightly against your chest by pulling with both arms. If you are doing it right, you will feel it in your forearms, elbows, and/or shoulders. You will feel the guitar digging very lightly into your chest. Again, you will not harm your guitar in any way--pull firmly, just enough to hold the strings down with your barre, **NOT** with all your might! Big Dennis tried to man-handle the instrument and in squeezing with his thumb, made matters worse, because squeezing with the thumb tends to make the barring finger arch up or bend instead of remaining flat across the neck, not to mention soreness and fatigue in the thumb. Little Jennifer knew intuitively to just use her arm strength. In fact, it is a great idea to practice barre chords without the thumb on the neck at all! (Keep reading, see

below.)

A second oftentimes overlooked factor in barre technique, is that when playing a full barre, the back knuckle or joint of the first finger (the joint closest to the wrist) must be "up". It is hard to explain in words, but keep this knuckle or back joint even with the tip of the finger (or even slightly higher but not so high that the finger lifts off the fretboard of course) so that the finger lies flat on the fretboard. Many people, when struggling with a barre, pull that knuckle or back joint down which makes the middle joint pop up slightly. No, no, no. Keep that knuckle or back joint up!

And course it goes almost without saying that the barre finger must be close to the fret and parallel with the fret.

Now, TRY THIS EXERCISE. In fact, this is how to teach anyone how to play a barre chord. I am assuming your guitar is in good adjustment and that you are using strings of a reasonable tension (using Hannabach or Aranjuan high tension strings when learning barre chords is not a good idea--they are much higher tension than other brands--but they are excellent strings).

Set your 3rd finger on the fifth string at the 5th fret. Set your 4th finger (little finger) on the fourth string at the 5th fret. Set your 2nd finger on the third string at the 4th fret. Be certain that 2nd finger is parallel with the fret and perpendicular to the fretboard, not slanting or falling over to the left. Also make certain that your thumb is in the middle of the neck, opposite the 3rd or 4th fret and fairly perpendicular to the neck and perhaps rolling over a little bit onto its left side. Now set the 1st finger across all six strings (the barre) at the 3rd fret making sure the back knuckle or joint is up, even with or slightly higher than the tip of the finger. Yes, you are holding a full G major barre chord at the third fret. (I recommend the third fret because the string tension for the barre is less at the third fret than at the first fret close to the nut). Now pull (not with all your might, you don't need a lot of power) the guitar against your chest with both arms. It should sound real clear. If it doesn't, play each string separately to see which string or strings are buzzing. Sometimes it's not the barre at all that is buzzing but one of the other fingers! That's good news because you just press a little harder with those fingers or adjust their position slightly and all is well. Also, you may need to slightly adjust where the tip of the barre finger falls--whether squarely on the 6th string, or perhaps a little past it to keep other strings out of soft spots or crevices of the finger. In the beginning, ALWAYS PLACE THE BARRE LAST! That is crucial for correct positioning.

Don't work on getting the chord clear for more than about 15 seconds. Once your hand or fingers get fatigued, the chord will sound worse and worse. Take a one-minute break to let the hand recover and try again. During this time reread the instructions in the paragraph above to Double-check that you are doing everything correctly. Then try again. Make sure that when you pull with your arms that you don't suddenly lower that back knuckle or change the thumb position or lean the 2nd finger over to the left towards the barre. Keep that 2nd finger perpendicular to the fretboard and parallel with the fret. I have 100% success teaching this barre chord to students if they follow these instructions!

Here's the real "Kicker". You should be able to play barre chords without the thumb on the neck at all! Again, you want to take the workload off the thumb. It is the arms, not the thumb that should be the power source. You can finger the G chord above, take the thumb off the neck and it should come out fine as long as the barre finger stays flat and the thumb and 2nd finger stay in their correct positions. If you want to kick it up a notch, a great and fun exercise is to play *Louie Louie* with barre chords without the thumb on the neck (and with it on the neck too). For those too young to have played or heard *Louie Louie*, take the G chord formation above, but put it at the 2nd fret (the barre at the 2nd fret, producing an F# major chord). Strum the chord three times. Then slide the chord up so the barre is at the 7th fret (B major) and strum twice. Slide the chord up two frets to the ninth fret but take off the second finger (C# minor). Strum three times. Slide back down two frets to the 7th fret and put the 2nd finger back down on the third string at the 8th fret (B major again). Strum 2 times. (We are playing in the key of F# major to avoid the barre chord at the first fret where the string tension is higher). Then repeat the progression. But don't overdo it. If it starts sounding bad, rest and try it again in a minute. If you are practicing without the thumb on the neck be sure to wiggle it around now and then to be certain it is loose--you can be using your arm strength correctly and still tense up the thumb which we don't want to do. We are trying to teach the thumb to stay relatively relaxed when playing barre chords, putting the work load on the arms.

If you want to kick it up yet another notch, take a song that you play fairly well (it doesn't even have to have any barre chords in it) and play it without the thumb on the neck. This will also teach you how to use your arm strength and not those weak thumb muscles. Don't misunderstand. You will not be able to play the song as well without the thumb on the neck. The thumb is essential, but only as a stabilizer, not as an active muscular participant. Playing pieces without the thumb on the neck is just a training or awareness exercise. **But do understand this--once you make the switchover from using thumb strength to arm strength, your playing will be far more aggressive, secure, accurate, and strong.** Remember, the louder you play, the harder you have to press down the strings with the left hand fingers. By using your arm strength you will be able to hold the strings down hard with no fatigue and play hard, loudly, and aggressively with the right hand. You will be more secure and play more accurately because your left hand will not suffer from fatigue.

Once again, remember: **You don't use massive amounts of strength--just enough to get the job done.** Most of the time the weight of the left arm (balanced with an almost imperceptible pull of the right arm) is enough. *Many good guitarists are actually unaware that they play with their arm strength, not hand strength.* It is often that subtle. Because the arm and shoulder muscles are so much stronger than the small hand muscles, most of the time the body is unaware of any real effort and certainly no strain--*there is no upper body tension.* If you are playing a difficult passage requiring heavy duty barres and stretches, then yes, more effort is required. *But your body will perceive that it is exerting far less strain and overall effort if the arm and shoulder muscles are used instead of relying heavily upon the hand muscles.* In the face of a difficult passage, many beginning guitarists panic and use a vise grip on the neck between the thumb and fingers. They just have to re-train their bodies to use their arm strength instead.

Here's a little additional sidelight to all this for the more advanced player. When playing heavy vibrato without the thumb on the neck, guess what muscles you use to hold the notes down? Yes, once again, it's

the arm muscles!

One last comment is that upper body strength is very important for a guitarist. I recommend, especially if you are a female, that you do light workouts to increase your arm and upper body strength. It will work absolute wonders in your playing.

So stop struggling and use Little Jennifer's secret.

Still have a barre chord that won't come out clean?

Little Jennifer's secret — arm strength instead of hand strength — fixes most barre chord problems. When a particular chord still buzzes or muffles, my **Barre Chord Wizard** can tell you why. Enter the chord's fingering, mark which strings aren't sounding clearly, and it gives you specific solutions — the hand, elbow, wrist, arm, thumb, and finger positioning that makes that particular chord come out clean.

Try the Barre Chord Wizard →