



In caring for children's voices we are aiming to do **THREE THINGS:**

- keep the voice box healthy
- reduce the strain on the voice
- help the child to monitor his/her own voice

## Keeping the Voice Box Healthy

The vocal cords are covered with mucus – a gluey, slippery substance that protects and lubricates them. If it becomes too dry or too thick this reduces its ability to protect the cords. The following suggestions can help to stop this happening.

**DRINK WATER REGULARLY:** Depending on the age and size of the child, they should drink 6-8 glasses (1.5 - 2 liters) each day. This should be spread out across the whole day. Encourage the child to take frequent drinks rather than, for example, having three glasses at lunch time and then not drinking again until they get home from school. There is no need to buy expensive bottled water: for most purposes tap water is fine. Teenage boys aged 14 years and over, will generally require about 11 glasses (2.6 liters) of water each day. Just be careful that children do not drink so much that they then feel too bloated to eat proper meals.

**AVOID CAFFEINE:** Tea, coffee and many fizzy drinks contain caffeine. This can be drying and it is also a diuretic – this means that it increases the discharge of urine and, therefore, the loss of more water.

**REDUCE FIZZY DRINKS:** As well as the possibility of containing caffeine, these often have high levels of sugar or sweeteners. These may also lead to dryness in the mouth and throat and can actually leave the child feeling thirstier.

**BE CAREFUL WITH FRUIT DRINKS:** Fruit juices, smoothies and the like can be beneficial. However, some have high levels of acidity, which is not good for the voice (or teeth). Read labels carefully before buying.

**EAT FRUIT AND VEG:** For a healthy body, now and in the future, the recommended daily intake is five portions of fruit and vegetables. Fruit and vegetables are high in essential vitamins and minerals. They are low fat, low calorie foods that also help maintain a healthy weight. In summary, a healthy diet will keep the whole body, including the voice, healthy. Children and young people often enjoy novelty foods, of course. So, rather than cutting these out all together, why not reduce them or, better still, keep them as an occasional treat?

**DRINK WITH SPICY FOODS:** Hot and spicy foods may cause dryness in the throat. Always drink plenty of water with foods like this.

**KEEP AIR MOIST:** Keep the air in rooms humid. In centrally heated rooms, keep a bowl of water on a table or on the windowsill above the radiator, or throw a wet towel on the radiator, so that the air is not too dry. Open a window to allow air to circulate. [CAUTION: DO NOT BLOCK AIR VENTS ON HEATING EQUIPMENT.] You can also use buy humidifiers designed for this job.



## Reducing Strain

### THINGS TO AVOID

**WHISPERING:** Surprisingly, whispering can be damaging to the voice because it puts the vocal cords under a great deal of stress. It is better for the child to speak gently with a husky or hoarse voice than it is to keep whispering.

**COUGHING AND THROAT-CLEARING:** Even what appears to be a gentle cough pushes the vocal cords together with a good deal of force. As the air blasts between the vocal cords it blows off some of the protective mucus layer and leads to drying. Because there is less mucus covering the cords they are more easily irritated. Of course, if the child has a cold, or similar, then coughing may be inevitable. Under these circumstances, encourage the child to take plenty of sips of water and to reduce the amount of talking by doing quiet activities.

**SHOUTING OR SCREAMING:** This forces the vocal cords together too roughly and will irritate them. Over long periods of time it can lead to soreness and, in some cases, small growths on the vocal cords such as vocal nodules.

**LOUD LAUGHING:** This is similar to shouting and screaming, forcing the vocal cords together with excess force. Often, there is a forceful rush of air from the lungs out through the voice box and this can lead to dryness.

**TOO MUCH SINGING OR HUMMING:** The child needs opportunities to rest the voice. Sometimes singing and humming is also done too far back (too deep) in the throat, causing tension around the voice box.

**TALKING OVER BACKGROUND NOISE:** Raising the voice (e.g. over the television, in the car) is effortful and leads to strain.

**IMPERSONATIONS:** Altering the voice to do impersonations or make strange sounds (for example a robot or a cartoon character) can strain the voice. Some cartoon characters are also not good models of a healthy voice.

### THINGS TO ENCOURAGE

**VOICE REST:** Depending on your circumstances, set aside a period of time, once or twice a day, when the child must not talk at all. He or she could do a quiet activity, such as watching television, reading, or doing a jigsaw. Try for around 15 minutes on each occasion.

**USING GESTURE:** During voice rest, encourage the use of gestures or mime – this can be turned into a fun game, as long as it does not become boisterous.

**PLAYING QUIETLY:** As much as possible, keep the atmosphere calm. When rushing about, the volume tends to go up and the voice can be strained.

**USING EASY VOICE:** This is done with a gentle voice, relaxed, easy breathing and a quiet volume. This should be encouraged when talking one-to-one, in groups, talking at mealtimes and when reading aloud.

**SLOWING DOWN:** Encourage the child to slow down when talking, as there is less chance of straining the vocal cords and the breathing will be more controlled. Give your full attention to what the child is saying so they know you are listening and do not have to rush or raise their voice to get their message across.

**WALKING OVER:** Instead of shouting across a room, playground or upstairs, encourage the child to walk over to the person they want to speak with. Try to be in the same room when talking together.



**ATTRACTING ATTENTION:** When in noisy environments such as the playground or during games lessons, encourage the child to attract attention by, for example, clapping or gently tapping someone on the shoulder. Also, when putting their hand up in class, encourage the child to do this without an accompanying noisy intake of breath.

**GOOD POSTURE:** When talking, encourage the child to sit or stand properly. For example, the child should avoid twisting around to talk to people behind them; they should not be lying face down on mats when reading aloud in class, and so on. It is also best to avoid running and talking at the same time.

## Self-monitoring

It is important to help the child identify what makes his or her voice 'good' and what does not. They should also be encouraged to monitor their voice at different times during the day so that they become aware of how they are using their voice at any particular moment...and then learn to change their behavior. Here are some ideas of how to encourage a 'good speaking voice'.

### WHAT KIND OF VOICE...?

Talk about what kind of voice you use when you're...

- happy
- angry
- sad
- frightened...and so on

Talk about how it makes you feel and how your throat and mouth feel when you speak like this.

### VOICE DETECTIVE

Ask the child to be a 'voice detective' for a day and to record when other people in the classroom/playgroup/home (1) use a very loud voice, (2) cough or clear their throat, and (3) whisper. The idea is that by getting the child to observe other people's voices he or she will start monitoring the volume of their own much better and reduce their own throat clearing and whispering.

### STAR CHARTS

Use these to set up a simple reward system. Perhaps the child gains a star if he or she keeps a 'good voice' at a time when they might typically be noisy, e.g. in the park, playtime at school, and so on. You can gradually change what is required of the child to gain the reward. Perhaps gaining 10 stars means he or she gets a 'special prize'. As long as it is motivating, most young children respond to this sort of scheme.

### GOOD MODELS

The child needs good models, both at home and at school. The child needs to see adults doing all the things that they expect him or her to do: no shouting, using easy voice, no whispering, no throat-clearing, and so on. Improving a child's voice means that the adults around him or her must fully commit to consistently using a 'good speaking voice'.

## RESOURCES

*Working with Children's Voice Disorders* by Hunt and Slater (2003) published by Speechmark [ISBN: 9780863882791] is a useful resource, with practical advice for both individual and group work.