Voice Dysphonia in Children

What is Voice Dysphonia?

Dysphonia is the term used to refer to disorders of the voice. This may present as a hoarse, weak, breathy or strained voice, with or without pain or discomfort in the throat. Children may produce a voice which sounds different in quality, loudness or pitch, to those of their brothers, sisters or friends.

What are the causes?

Some of the causes for this may include:

• Inflammation of the larynx (voice box) due to an infection or allergy
• Reflux - if stomach acid comes far enough up the oesophagus (food pipe) and spills over onto the voice box
• Lesions on the vocal cords – including vocal cord nodules and cysts. This is often due to over using the voice or screaming/shouting
• Trauma to the vocal cords from injury or surgery
• Weakness or paralysis of the vocal cords

How does the voice work?

In children, voice disorders are mainly associated with voice misuse which can cause vocal fold nodules. The larynx (voice box) where voice is produced lives in the throat and is particularly small and vulnerable to general wear and tear and overuse/damage. The vocal folds which vibrate to make noise, are very small in a child (between 3 - 8mm long). When talking, they vibrate together about 230 times per second. This vibration is caused by air flow from the lungs and small muscle movements in the voice box. If the vibration is forced or strained then the vocal folds can become sore and red and nodules/cysts can form.

What should I do?

If you notice a problem with your child's voice, which has not resolved after 2 weeks, you should seek advice from your GP. Your GP may be able to treat their voice problem. Otherwise they can refer your child for specialist investigation and treatment. Your child may then be treated by an Ear, Nose and Throat Doctor and referred to Speech and Language Therapy for further management, if necessary.

Please contact your local Speech and Language Therapy department for more information.

Updated April 2022