

Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust: Information for young people and families



Producing a healthy voice: a guide for parents supporting their child with healthy voice production

Children may produce a voice which sounds different in quality, loudness or pitch, to those of their brothers, sisters or friends, for many different reasons. Your speech and language therapist can explain the specific reason why your child is having voice difficulties. We know that certain vocal behaviours can be making the problem worse and there are ways that your child can use and look after their voice which can promote healthy change to the voice and vocal tract.

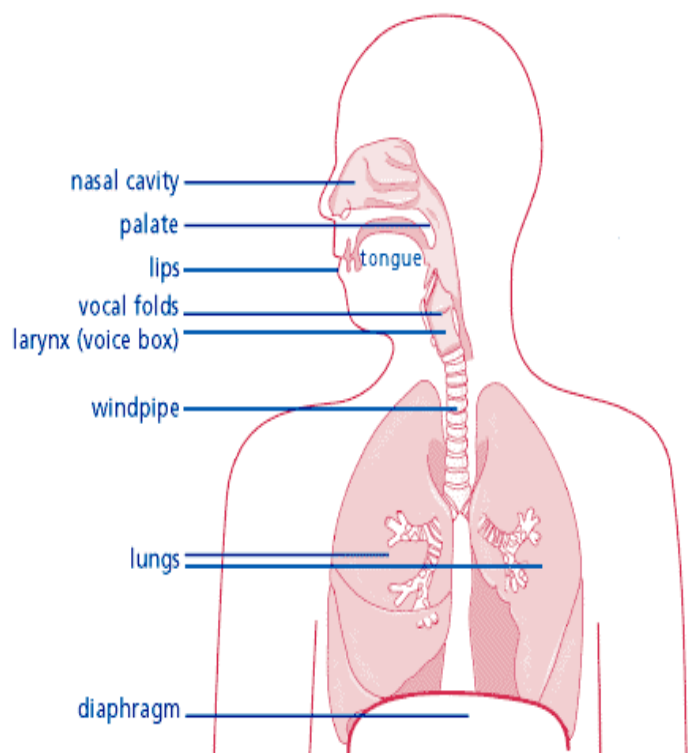
This leaflet is designed to help you encourage your child to produce a healthy and efficient voice.

It's really important to look after our voice!

The voice box, which is also called the larynx, (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.



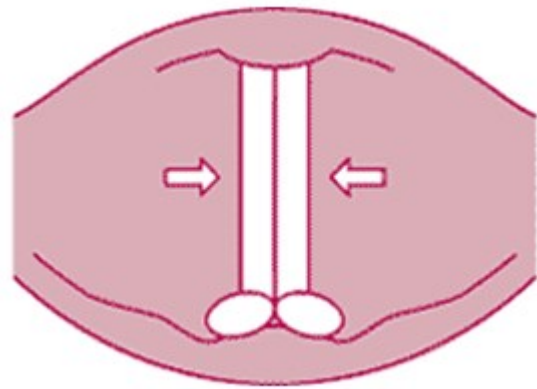
Parts of the body involved in voice production



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Vocal cords at rest (breathing in and out
with no voice)



Vocal cords when vibrating (when we
make a voice)

Diagram from GOSH NHS Foundation Trust, August 2019

What happens over time?

The vocal cords are more delicate than our hands. Our hands can withstand force and strain because they have a tough barrier of skin.

- * Try clapping your hands together for 10 seconds. They may become red or even a little sore but this will not last very long.

The vocal cords are much more exposed than our hands and feel this force (which occurs when they vibrate together) much more. If the voice is not rested or it is continuously strained over a period of time, it becomes more difficult for the redness and swelling to settle down. The sound of the voice may change because of this.

Our vocal folds do have some protection against soreness and swelling.

This is provided by mucus (a bit like the saliva in your mouth) and it forms a coating over the vocal cords. This can protect the vocal cords from dryness, irritation and the impact from force. It is quite thin and clear but if it becomes thick or sticky, due to dryness, then the protection to the vocal cords is lost and it is harder for the vocal cords to vibrate. This can produce a strained voice quality.

This leaflet contains advice designed to inform you on how to help your child reduce the strain or damage to their vocal cords and how to help them produce a healthy protective mucus.

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Reducing the strain and damage to your child's vocal cords:

As adults, children often view our behaviours as a model of how they should act and therefore the most helpful way of supporting them is being a good role model for healthy voice use. The advice in this leaflet is of value to all of us. Wherever possible, try to discuss with your child that you are making healthy changes for the family as this will make it easier for the child to understand, follow and feel supported in the changes. It may also be helpful to discuss this advice sheet with your child's Teachers as they can support your child with healthy voice use at school.



Encourage quiet play activities and voice rest

Vocal rest should be a routine part of a child's day, especially after more vocally demanding activities such as the school day. Activities such as puzzles, drawing, painting and looking at books can all be done quietly. A calm environment can be an excellent time to model a soft, smooth voice.



Encourage the use of smooth, easy voice

Your child's Speech and Language Therapist can demonstrate this to you. It involves easy breathing, gentle voice and a quiet conversational volume. It is a calm flowing voice, with a relaxed throat.



We change our voice to express how we feel

If your child is tired or upset, they may find it more difficult to use a relaxed, easy voice. When they are tired it's best for them to play quietly. If you feel your child is straining their voice to communicate emotion, speak to your Speech and Language Therapist about it.



Avoid shouting and using a loud voice

Aim to be in the same room when communicating; avoid calling up the stairs. Turn down background noise levels, such as the TV, to a level where you can speak softly and be heard. If your child takes part in singing/drama, reducing the time/frequency of these activities can help reduce vocal strain.



Avoid whispering

This can have a tiring effect on the vocal cords and dries out the protective mucus that coats them.



Avoid coughing and throat-clearing

Throat clearing can just be a habit but it can also be due to the vocal cords being dry and sticky. If your child coughs and clears their throat a lot then try to encourage them to sip water or to swallow the irritation away. This may be difficult for them to keep up so a reward chart may also help.

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Avoid coke, tea, coffee and some energy drinks

Some drinks such as these contain caffeine which has a negative effect on the body's ability to stay hydrated. Caffeine causes the body to lose water. Your child's intake of these drinks should be limited to no more than 2 small ones a day.

Be aware that certain medicines can also cause dehydration

For those children who have asthma, or take medication for allergies, the inhalers and antihistamine drugs can make the mucus on the vocal cords dry and sticky. Drinking water regularly can help to combat this. Inhalers can be used with a spacer which can reduce the drying effect. Your G.P can provide this. Rinsing with water after using the inhaler can also help. Older children may find it helpful to use steam inhalation with a bowl of hot water and a towel. This activity should always be supervised to avoid accidents. Always consult your GP first if you want to alter the medication that your child is on.

Keeping the voice box protected with healthy mucus

It is recommended that the whole family also follow this advice and to perhaps make it fun by creating a family challenge i.e. who can drink the most water in a week (see reward chart on following page.)

Drink lots of water

The body needs lots of water every day to function and be healthy. The vocal cords need water to produce the clear thin mucus that protects them. If the mouth feels dry then it's likely that the vocal cords are too. It is recommended that your child drinks between one and one and a half litres per day, depending on their size. Children over 14 years - adulthood should drink 2 litres a day. This can be supplemented with fruit juices but should not be replaced by them. If your child refuses to drink water, sugar free squash is the next best option. Your child will need to drink regularly at school as well as home.

Healthy air conditions at home

Central heating and having the windows closed can cause the air in your home to be dry, which encourages dehydration. To reverse this effect, you can place small bowls of water or damp towels onto the radiators so that the moisture is carried into the air you breathe. You can also buy small humidifiers to put in rooms where your child spends a lot of time. There are also other irritants in the air such as smoke, dust and chemical fumes. Discourage people from smoking around your child and avoid places where there is a lot of smoke. Remove dust from rooms regularly by vacuuming floors, sofas, bedding and mattresses etc.



My Reward Chart

My name is

| Monday | | | | | | |
|-----------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Tuesday | | | | | | |
| Wednesday | | | | | | |
| Thursday | | | | | | |
| Friday | | | | | | |
| Saturday | | | | | | |
| Sunday | | | | | | |

It can take a while for your child and your family to make changes with how you use and look after your voices. Start with one or two changes and reward your child's progress. Using a reward chart like this one can be highly motivating for your child.