



# Encouraging your child to produce a healthy voice: information for families

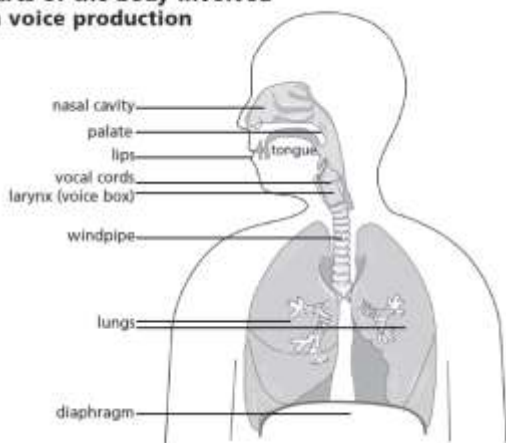
There are many reasons why children’s voices may sound different in quality, loudness or pitch, to those of their friends, brothers and sisters. Your child’s speech and language therapist and/or ENT doctor will explain the specific reason why your own child is having voice difficulties. Whatever the reason, we know that there are certain things that your child can do to make the most of their voice. There may also be things that they are doing that make the problem worse. This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) is designed to help you to encourage your child to produce a healthy and efficient voice.

## Important

If you think that following any of this advice in this information sheet will cause problems with your child’s other medical care, then please discuss your questions with your speech and language therapist or GP.

Our voice box (larynx) is vulnerable to wear and tear. Children’s vocal cords are particularly delicate and very small (approximately 3 to 8mm in length). They vibrate together every time a child talks, shouts, laughs, coughs and makes other noises.

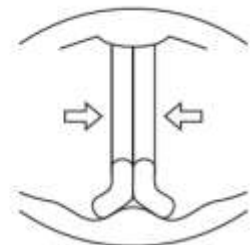
### Parts of the body involved in voice production



When young children talk, their vocal cords vibrate together about 300 times a second. This vibration occurs using air from the lungs and small muscle adjustments in the voice box. If the vibration is forced or strained then the vocal cords can become sore and red.



Resting vocal cords  
(when we breathe in and out without voice)



Vibrating vocal cords  
(when we make a voice)

If the voice is not rested, or it has been strained or used for a long time, it becomes difficult for the redness and swelling to settle down. The sound of the voice may also change because of this.

Some of the advice in this leaflet will help your child to reduce the strain or damage to their vocal cords.

Our vocal cords do have some protection against soreness and swelling. This is provided by mucus (similar to saliva in your mouth) which covers the vocal cords and acts as a protective coating. This mucus should be thin and clear. If it becomes dry, thick or sticky then the protection to the cords is lost and vibration of the vocal cords is more difficult.

Some of the advice in this leaflet is designed to help your child produce healthy mucus.

## **Reducing the strain and damage to your child's voice box**

The most helpful thing you can do as a parent is to provide a good role model for healthy voice use. All the advice given in this leaflet is of value to all of us, children and adults alike. Think about your own voice use and those of other children and adults who have regular contact with your child.

Wherever possible, try to make the recommended changes together as a family. This will make it easier for your child to understand what is expected and to see the advice as supportive rather than punishing.

You may also find it helpful to discuss this advice sheet with your child's teachers, as they can be very helpful in encouraging healthy voice use at school.

### **Avoid shouting and loud voice**

Reduce the amount of background noise at home. For example, turn the television, radio or music system down to a level where you and your children can speak softly and still be heard.

Avoid calling out to each other from room to room or up the stairs. Aim to be face to face when you are speaking to each other.

Loud singing and drama can also strain the voice. If your child takes part in these activities, you should ask their speech and language therapist for advice.

### **Encourage your child not to use strange throat noises and not to imitate characters with unhealthy voices**

Many characters in films and on children's television use unhealthy, strained voices. If you try to imitate these voices yourself you will feel how much it strains your own voice. If your child is imitating a favourite character, or making robot or dinosaur noises or something similar then try to explain that this can damage his or her voice box. Reinforce good voice use with a sticker chart (see last page for an example of the type of chart you could use) and/or lots of praise. You may find a character that your child likes who has a healthier voice and you can encourage them to imitate this character instead.

### **Avoid coughing and throat-clearing**

This may be a habit but people sometimes do it because their vocal cords are dry and sticky (see advice on next page). If your child coughs and clears their throat a lot then try to encourage them to have a sip of water or to swallow the irritation away. It can be difficult for children to remember to do this to start with and they may need reminding. A reward chart may also help.

### **Avoid long conversations or other prolonged voice use**

This includes conversations on the telephone or in the home or school.

### **Encourage quiet play activities**

It is important for your child to have time in the day when his or her voice is able to rest and recover. Activities such as building games, puzzles, sticking, art activities and looking at books can all be done quietly. You may need to be with young children during these games. This is a good time for you to use a soft, smooth voice as an example for your child to follow.

It is useful to encourage quiet play after more vocally demanding activities, for example, playing football or swimming in a noisy pool. Quiet periods will allow the vocal cords to rest and recover.

### **Encourage the use of smooth, easy voice**

Your child's speech and language therapist will demonstrate this type of voice to you. It involves easy breathing, gentle voice and a quiet conversational volume.

### **Avoid whispering**

This can tire the voice and dry out the protective mucus that coats the vocal cords.

### **Our voices respond to how we feel**

Our voices work most efficiently when we are energised and happy. As adults, we often know when someone is tired and unhappy by the way their voice sounds. If your child is tired or upset, they may find it more difficult to monitor their voice or to use a smooth, easy voice. When your child is tired, it is best for them to play quietly and to avoid straining their voice.

Some children find it difficult to say how they are feeling. They may strain their voices to communicate their emotions. It would be helpful for you to discuss this with your child's speech and language therapist if you feel this is a difficult area for your child.

## **Keeping the voice box protected with healthy mucus**

Once again, it is helpful for the whole family to follow the advice below. Your child's school will also need to be involved.

### **Drink lots of water**

Water helps the body to produce clear, thin mucus. If your mouth feels dry, then your throat and vocal cords will also be dry. Young children

should typically drink 1 to 1.5 litres per day depending on their size. Children over 14 years should drink approximately 2 litres a day. Two to three drinks of juice a day can be incorporated into this quota but too much juice may cause an upset tummy. Your child will need to drink regularly at school as well as at home. We recommend you discuss how much your child should drink with your speech and language therapist or doctor.

### **Avoid coke, tea, coffee and some energy drinks**

These contain caffeine, which acts as a diuretic, that is, it encourages the body to get rid of water. Limit your child's intake to no more than one small drink of this type a day.

### **Be aware that certain medicines can encourage drying and dehydration**

Inhalers for asthma, antihistamines for allergies and some other drugs can make the mucus on our vocal cords dry and sticky. It is important to try to thin the mucus as much as possible by drinking regularly.

Inhalers may be used with a spacer device that your family doctor (GP) can prescribe. Using this can reduce the drying effect of the asthma drug. Rinsing the mouth with water after using an inhaler can also help. Older children may find steam inhalation helpful using a bowl of hot water and a towel. You should always supervise your child when they are doing this to avoid accidents. We do not recommend that you alter the medication that your child is on unless it is in consultation with his or her doctor.

### **Keep the air in your home healthy**

Central heating and closed windows encourage dehydration. You can combat this by placing small bowls of water or damp towels on radiators so that the moisture is carried into the air you breathe. You can buy small humidifiers to put in rooms where your child spends a lot of time.

Smoke, dust and chemical fumes are strong irritants to the vocal cords. Discourage people from smoking around your child and avoid places where there is a lot of smoke. Make sure you remove dust from your child's bedroom on a regular basis, vacuuming their mattress, pillows and other bedding. Ventilate rooms where there are paint fumes, cleaning fluid smells, smoke and similar potential irritants.

## Keeping track of your child's voice care

It can take a while for your child and your family to make changes to how they use their voice. Start with a few changes and reward your child's progress. Sticker charts can be a useful way of you checking how your child is progressing and can be a positive way of encouraging them to make further changes week by week. On the back of this leaflet is an example of a sticker chart that you could use with your child.

## Example sticker reward chart

You could develop similar charts for other aspects of healthy voice care, such as drinking water or not coughing.

Date	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
I remembered to talk with my quiet/gentle voice this morning							
I remembered to talk with my quiet/gentle voice this afternoon							
Total number of stickers today							

## Further information and support

Talk to your Speech and Language Therapist – call the department on 020 7813 8110

The British Voice Association has various helpful resources on their website at [www.britishvoiceassociation.org.uk](http://www.britishvoiceassociation.org.uk)