

Children's Voice- Information and Advice

From time to time, we all notice changes in our voice. For example, we might have had a cold or another type of infection which causes our voice to sound different. Vocal changes happen in children's voices too. During these changes a child may encounter differences in their loudness, pitch or voice quality (for example, they could have a more hoarse, croaky or breathy voice quality.)

If these changes persist for more than three weeks, it would be a good idea for the child's voice to be assessed by their GP and / or an Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) Doctor. Once a child has been seen by an ENT Doctor, if voice therapy has been recommended as an appropriate next step, then a Speech and Language Therapist from our team will be in touch.

Voice Disorders

Dysphonia is the term used to refer to disorders of the voice. A child with dysphonia may have a hoarse, weak, breathy or strained voice, with or without pain or discomfort in the throat.

Aphonia is the term used to describe a loss of voice. A child with aphonia may or may not be able to whisper.

What causes children's voice disorders

There are many reasons why children may experience ongoing changes to their voice. Factors which impact our voice include how we use our voice, how well we look after our voice, air quality, medical conditions, medications, psycho-emotional wellbeing, surgery or trauma to the head and neck area.

Vocal Fold Nodules

Our voice box (larynx) is delicate. Inside our voice box are the vocal folds, also called vocal cords, which we need to make sound. Children's vocal folds are particularly vulnerable and very small (approximately 3 to 8mm in length). They vibrate together very quickly to make lots of different noises, such as talking, shouting, laughing, screaming and coughing.

If the vocal folds come together under force or strain, they can start to become red and irritated. If this irritation does not have time to resolve and the voice is not rested or the vocal cords repeatedly come together in a forceful way (e.g. during shouting), then we are likely to hear changes in voice quality.

Over time, repetitive force or strain at the level of the vocal folds can result in vocal fold nodules. These are small white masses that can appear on one or both vocal folds and will alter voice quality. Vocal fold nodules are very common in children.

Please see the advice section below on how to support your child in producing a healthy voice.

Reflux

Acid reflux occurs when acidic digestive juices rise from the stomach and into the oesophagus and throat. This can cause swelling and irritation in our voicebox (larynx) and vocal cords. This irritation may lead to changes in voice quality, resulting in a hoarse, tight or croaky voice. Other symptoms of reflux include a sore, dry and sensitive throat, frequent throat clearing, a feeling of a lump in the throat, or a nasty taste in the back of the mouth.

Making changes to diet or lifestyle can improve voice difficulties associated with reflux. In some cases, the GP or ENT consultant may prescribe medication to help with reflux symptoms. Please see the advice below on how to support your child in looking after their voice.

How to support your child's voice

Wherever possible, please try and put the advice below into practice as a family. Get siblings involved too! This will make it easier for your child to understand what is being asked of them and to see the advice as supportive rather than punishing.

The best thing you can do as a parent or caregiver is model healthy voice use. Please think about your own voice use and see if you can incorporate some of the strategies below into your daily life too- We could all benefit from looking after our voice!

- Encourage your child to avoid shouting or using a loud voice wherever possible.
- Reduce the amount of background noise at home. For example, turn the television or music down to a level where you and your children can speak softly and still be heard.
- Use audio books or audio downloads in the car to help to create an opportunity for vocal rest.
- Encourage your child to go to the person they want to speak to. Don't shout from room to room.
- Encourage your child not to imitate characters with unhealthy voices. Many TV characters have strange voices that put strain on our voice box when we try and copy them.
- Practice turn taking when the family is altogether so that siblings aren't competing to be heard. Facilitating taking turns to each share news about their day, at the dinner table for example, can be rewarding.
- Encourage quiet times for some part of each day. Children need time to relax and switch off. 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.

- Encourage your child to take frequent sips of water throughout the day. Ensure they stay hydrated.
- Keep the air in your home healthy. Smoke, dust and chemical fumes irritate the vocal cords.
- If your child needs to cough, or if they frequently throat clear, encourage them to cough gently or take a sip of water and swallow instead.
- Avoid fizzy, sugary, and caffeinated drinks. Caffeine is a diuretic which encourages the body to get rid of water. They also further aggravate reflux symptoms. Reduce your child's intake of these and encourage them to drink. If your child suffers from reflux, reducing your child's intake of spicy and fatty foods can help.
- Medication such as antihistamines and inhalers for asthma can encourage dryness and dehydration. Extra water intake after using these may be necessary.
- Talk about your child's feelings - help them to put how they feel into words rather than your child shouting or getting angry.
- Suggest other ways for your child to express themselves instead of shouting, e.g. pictures of emotions to point to or show, a squeezey 'toy' to hold and squeeze.
- Our voices work best when we are feeling energised or happy. If your child is tired or angry their voice is likely to change. If they are angry, they may find it more difficult to use a smooth easy voice. If they are tired, they will benefit from some quiet play and voice rest.

It can take a while for your child and your family to input the above advice. Choose a few changes first and reward your child's progress. It's important for you to feel like the changes are manageable so try not to do too much at once! A sticker chart may be a rewarding way of monitoring your child's progress and may encourage them to make further changes each week. Find an example sticker chart here- [My Voice Sticker Chart pdf \[pdf\] 35KB](#)

Useful Links

- Great Ormond Street Hospital NHS Trust's Leaflet - [Encouraging your child to produce a healthy voice F0530 FINAL Aug19.pdf](#)
- The British Voice Association resources: Resources Archive - [Resources Archive - The British Voice Association](#)

Questions

If you have any questions about the information on this advice sheet, then please contact the CPFT Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy Service and we will be happy to help you.

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