

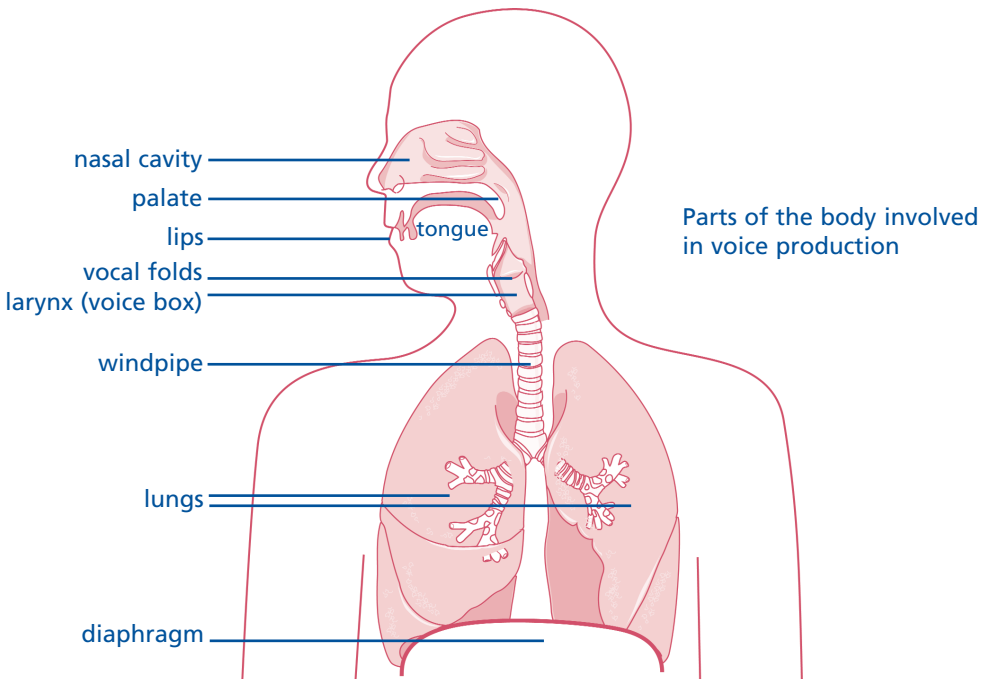
# Encouraging your child to produce a healthy voice

Information for families

Great Ormond Street Hospital  
for Children NHS Trust

**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 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 his or her voice. There may also be things that he or she is doing that make the problem worse.**

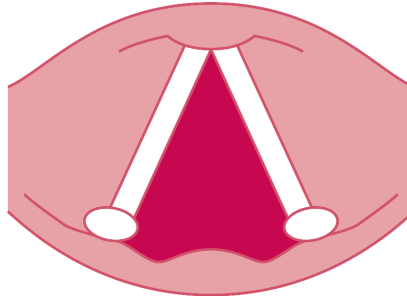
*This leaflet is designed to help you to encourage your child to produce a healthy and efficient voice.*



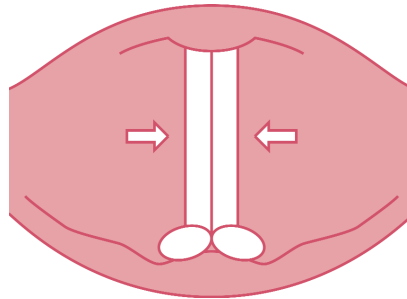
## Why is voice care important?

Our voice box (larynx) is vulnerable to wear and tear. Children's vocal cords (vocal folds) are particularly delicate and very small (approximately 3-8mm in length). They vibrate together every time a child talks, shouts, laughs, coughs and makes other noises. When young children talk, their vocal folds 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 effect on the vocal folds is like the effect on your hands if you were to clap them together continuously. Eventually your hands would become very sore and red. They would also feel tired and might even swell up. Our vocal folds are more delicate than our hands and feel even more acutely the effect of continuous strain or force. If the voice is not rested, or it has been strained or used for a long time, it will be impossible for the redness and swelling to settle down. The sound of the voice may also change.

**Some of the advice in this leaflet will help your child to reduce the strain or damage to his or her vocal folds.**



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



**Vibrating vocal folds (when we make a voice)**

Our vocal folds do have some protection against soreness and swelling. This is provided by mucus (similar to saliva in your mouth) which coats the folds 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 folds is lost and vibration of the vocal folds 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

## Introduction

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 of him or her 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 hi-fi 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.

When you are trying to get each other's attention, avoid shouting out and instead, clap your hands, ring a bell, place a hand on the person's arm or shoulder or find another way that will work in your home. Remember that it is helpful for everyone to use the same rule!

Loud singing and drama can also strain the voice. If your child takes part in these activities, you should ask his or her 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 television use unhealthy, strained voices – for example, Bart Simpson and his family. 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 noises or dinosaur noises or something similar with his or her voice box then try and 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 good 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 folds are dry and sticky (see advice on next page). If your child coughs and clears his or her throat a lot then try to encourage him or her 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.



### **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, drawing, painting 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. Make the focus of the activity what you and your child are doing rather than what you are saying.

Quiet play should also follow activities in which your child has been more vocal, for example, playing football or swimming in a noisy pool. This will allow the vocal folds 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 folds.



### **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 his or her voice sounds. If your child is tired or upset, he or she 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 him or her to play quietly.

Some children find it difficult to say what they are feeling and 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

## Introduction

Once again, it is helpful for the whole family to follow this advice. 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 folds will also be dry. It is recommended that your child drinks between one and one and a half litres depending on his or her size. Children over 14 years should drink 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.

### Avoid coke, tea and coffee

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 two small drinks 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 folds 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 G.P can prescribe,

which can reduce the drying effect of the asthma drug. Rinsing 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 he or she is 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 breath. 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 folds. 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 his or her 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. 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.



**NB. If you think that following any of this advice will cause problems because of your child's other medical care, then please discuss your questions with your speech and language therapist or GP.**

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Written by the Speech and Language Therapy Department  
in collaboration with the Patient Information Group  
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust  
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**Please ask your child's speech and language therapist if you have any questions about any of the advice in this leaflet.**

**Contact Name:**

**Contact Telephone No:**



# Learning to care for my voice – sticker chart

Week beginning

(copy one for each week)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
I remembered not to clear my throat or cough this morning							
I remembered not to clear my throat or cough this afternoon							
Total number of stickers today							

**NB. You could also use a similar chart to encourage your child not to shout, or to drink more water, juice, etc.**

Have you managed not to cough and throat clear as much as last week? (tick the right box)

A lot less

A little less

No less

A little more

A lot more