

Voice Care Advice

What is a voice disorder?

'Voice' is the sound produced by the voice box or 'larynx', inside your throat. Inside the voice box there are 'vocal cords' which come together and vibrate when you talk or make noises such as shouting, laughing and coughing. If the vocal cords come together too forcefully or are strained, for example through shouting and screaming, they can become red and swollen, particularly if the voice is used in this way over a long period. This often changes how the voice sounds, and this is what is known as a voice disorder.

There are several things which you can encourage your child to do, or avoid doing, to help improve their voice.

How can you help to reduce strain/damage?

- Discourage too much shouting and loud voice use.
- Discourage long conversations, for example on the telephone
- Try to reduce background noise at home. For example, turn the television or radio down so that your child doesn't have to raise their voice to be heard.
- Discourage shouting from one room to another – try to be in the same room and speak face to face.
- Discourage 'throaty' character noises, such as dinosaur noises, which strain the voice. Explain to your child that they may be damaging their voice box.
- Discourage your child from coughing and throat-clearing as this can cause trauma to the vocal cords. If your child feels the need to clear their throat it is better for them to have a sip of water and swallow firmly to clear the irritation. They may be throat-clearing because their vocal cords are dry and sticky, and this could be an indication that they are not drinking enough.
- Encourage times in the day when your child plays quietly so that their voice can have a rest. This is important in particular after noisy activities, for example if they have been shouting during a football match.
- Discourage whispering as this can be tiring and drying for the vocal cords.
- Try to make sure your child gets enough sleep as they are more likely to strain their voice when they are tired.

How to keep the voice box healthy

The vocal cords are covered by a layer of mucus which gives them some protection against soreness and swelling. This mucus should be thin and clear, and if it becomes dry, thick or sticky the vocal cords are not as well protected and it is more difficult for them to vibrate.

- Make sure your child drinks plenty of non-caffeinated fluids, ideally water, as this helps the body to produce clear, thin mucus. The European Food Safety Authority's recommendations for daily intake are as follows:

Age	Quantity of fluid per day
6-12 months	800-1000ml
12-24 months	1100-1200ml
2-3 years	1300ml
4-8 years	1600ml
Boys 9-13 years	2100ml
Girls 9-13 years	1900ml
Boys 14 years+	2.5L
Girls 14 years+	2.0L

- Your child should avoid drinking caffeinated drinks such as coke, tea and coffee, as caffeine is a diuretic which dehydrates the body.
- Some medications, such as antihistamines, can be drying, and it is very important for children on these medications to drink regularly. Asthma inhalers can affect the vocal cord mucus, so use of a spacer device is advised and your child should also rinse their mouth with water after using their inhaler.
- Steam inhalation may be helpful for older children under adult supervision.
- Central heating can be dehydrating, so try placing a bowl of water by the radiator, or using a humidifier.
- Smoke irritates the vocal cords so your child should avoid smoky environments. Dust and chemical fumes are also irritants, so dust your child's bedroom regularly and ensure good ventilation if there are any paint or cleaning product fumes in the house.

It is important for parents and others in the household to provide a good example for healthy voice use, so it is helpful for the whole family to follow the above advice. It may also be useful to get your child's school on board.

It may take time for your child to get used to using their voice in a different way, so introduce the changes slowly and reward your child for the progress that they make.

Voice therapy

If your child continues to present with a voice disorder, which is causing them concern, or is affecting how well they are understood, it may be appropriate for them to have some voice therapy sessions, which should be provided by your local speech and language therapy service. In this case they are likely first to be referred to an Ear Nose and Throat Specialist in order for their voice box to be examined.

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