

I teach them to “lift” and energize their pharynxes and larynxes using a wide variety of games and directions. These activities work the same for all voices, but boys seem at a higher risk in this society for not singing because many of them fear “sounding like girls or women.”

12) Hormonal changes (A little known fact is that girls’ voices change at puberty, most often creating a breathy voice in the high register which feels like a loss of power. To my knowledge, there have been no effective studies of the effects of menopause on the female voice.)

13) Negative associations with singing

CARING FOR THE VOICE

If we look at the factors that can harm the voice, we can imagine what would help us care for the voice.

- 1) Control allergens as much as possible, and keep the immune system strong to fight viruses and colds
- 2) Be mindful of the voices you imitate
- 3) Breathe clean air whenever possible
- 4) Avoid caffeine and other diuretics, drink plenty of good old water
- 5) Don’t smoke
- 6) If you are an extrovert or have a job which requires a lot of talking, give your voice a rest each day and reduce the intensity with which you talk
- 7) If you are an introvert, exercise your voice each day with flutter tonguing, motorboating, or deedle-deeing. Practice lifting and energizing your voice.
- 8) Rest adequately
- 9) If you are an abuse survivor or are in an abusive relationship, seek help so that you can heal these issues which so deeply affect voice and well-being
- 10) If you have difficulties coordinating certain tongue and throat movements, seek help to develop that coordination
- 11) If your voice didn’t develop its flexibility as a child, seek help to learn how to release its full flexibility, energy and expressiveness
- 12) If you have experienced voice changes that you think are due to hormones, learn more about that and seek help in adjusting to the changes they bring to the voice
- 13) Seek out a teacher who understands psychological, physical, and emotional dimensions of voice production to help you learn to sing. Find a folk club, song circle or community chorus which encourages relaxed singing.

Our voices are a reflection of our spiritual, emotional and physical states. When we are tired our voices are tired. When we are energetic it comes through our voices. Listening to our voices can help us listen to our whole selves - body and spirit. Thank you for taking this time in voice lessons to understand better how to honor your voice.

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UNDERSTANDING AND CARING FOR THE VOICE

Reflections by Judy Fjell ©2007

VOICE IS CENTRAL

The human voice and the power of speech are truly unique to our species. When we stop to think about it, we can’t help but admire the way that our voices enable us to communicate through language. The organ itself is quite complex - utilizing the larynx, the pharynx, the tongue, the ears, the eyes, the brain, the lungs, the diaphragm, the intercostal muscles, the abdominal muscles in a complex weaving of neuromuscular memory.

Voice evolved as an instrument of survival and each of us owes our lives many times over to its existence. We cry out for help when we, or those we love, are in danger. Not only that, the larynx itself helps us to survive if our epiglottis fails. The same vocal folds that collide to create the vibrations of our voices also power the cough which repels unwanted water or food from our tracheas.

Without the voice organ, most of us might have suffocated, drowned, been run over or eaten by now. We can thank our voices for our very existence. (Incidentally the tissue of the vocal folds is indistinguishable under the microscope from cervical tissue! Talk about “life-giving”)

But there are other things for which we should be deeply grateful to our voices. Not only do our voices enable us to survive, but they also give us thousands of ways to thrive as fully human beings. When we feel sad, we wail and cry or moan. When we feel angry, we shout. When we feel love, we express it not only with our hugs and kisses, but also with our voices. When we need consolation, we express our distress to a trusted friend, a professional, or a divine being. Sometimes simply voicing our distress brings relief. When we have strong opinions we write or speak them so as not to burst in frustration. When we feel a need for community, we come together with our voices in song. The harmony of the singing can heal our loneliness.

Voice - how central it is to the quality of life we experience as human beings. Even the word “person” comes from the Greek “per - son” - “through sound.” We owe a lot to voice. Our lives and the quality of our lives are inextricably entwined through voice.

WHEN DOES VOICE BEGIN?

Our individual voices began to develop In utero sometime between the 2nd and 4th month alongside the development of hearing. We couldn't speak, of course, but we ingeniously developed a unique set of gestures in response to phonemes and sounds swimming around us. As soon as we emerged into the world with our first breath and cry, we continued our voice exploration - babbling and cooing and sputtering until eye contact and smiles and sounds began to put us in full communication with other humans.

Speech emerges because of our need to communicate with others. It continues to develop as we learn to make sense of the world around us. Initially, speech takes place in the context of family and caregivers - our first words are often "mama," "papa" or another beloved fixture in our lives. Complexity increases as we are exposed to more words, phrases, concepts and connections. Human motivation to communicate is so strong that thousands of languages came into existence throughout the development of humanity, each with its own unique sounds and subtleties. There are roughly 6500 languages in the world today.

Any of us could have learned to speak any language from the time we were born, but we speak only that which we hear. Sounds not used in our native language ultimately fall completely out of our repertoire of hearing and, as a result, out of the realm of our speaking. A Hopi saying suggests that "we are born knowing everything and spend the rest of our lives forgetting." In the case of language this is most certainly true. We reproduce only what we hear. My Japanese friends absolutely cannot hear the difference between "l" and "r". And, try as I might, I absolutely cannot hear exactly how they make the unique sound that begins the word "Fuji." We know that children learn additional languages much more easily than adults. Children haven't yet "forgotten" how to hear those individual sounds and language patterns and are thus able more easily to form them into speech.

It is important to remember that gesture is at the core of our first communication and continues to be central to voice production. This is one of the reasons I use movement and solfeggio hand signs so extensively in my teaching.

HOW DOES THE SPEAKING VOICE DIFFER FROM THE SINGING VOICE?

Even though the same vocal organ is used both to speak and to sing, the singing voice employs a unique production of sound. Singing is an elongated, voiced exhale. The larynx creates the initial vibrations, which are actually collisions of the vocal folds. Singing an "A 440" sets in motion 440 collisions. The full use of the voice requires the entire body. The diaphragm takes in the air necessary for the exhale. The ears, the eyes, and the brain tell us what sound to make - the pitch, the vowels and consonants, the length of the pitch, the rhythm patterns, etc. Exhale is controlled in a number of ways by the lungs, the throat, and the abdominal

and intercostal muscles. In addition, the pharynx resonates and amplifies the sound. The pharynx is the space which extends upwards from the vocal folds to the throat, mouth, and the back of the nose. The tongue, teeth, and shape of the pharynx determine the fine points of the singing sound.

To begin experiencing the difference between the speaking voice and singing voice, simply say "mm-hmm," as though you are considering an idea someone has just shared. Now place one hand on your abdomen and the other hand palm down under your nose. Say "mm-hmm" again with a little more enthusiasm. Do you feel the movement of your abdominal muscles and the puff of air? The initial "mmm" is produced by the speaking voice, but when we get to the "hmm" part, our singing voice engages with its corresponding support.

The singing voice employs a wider range of highs and lows, which requires much more flexibility and energy than the speaking voice. People often equate singing with pitch-matching, but pitch-matching is only part of the process of finding the singing voice in the first place. Everyone with a normal vocal organ should be able to produce a singing voice.

Anyone who believes that he or she cannot sing simply has not found a suitable teacher. Good vocal teachers can help anyone release his or her natural singing voice.

HOW DO PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL FACTORS AFFECT VOICE?

The following factors can put people at risk for harming their singing voices, losing their voices, or not developing them in the first place:

- 1) Chronic ear infections, allergies, bronchitis, and laryngitis
- 2) Living with humans or television characters who model low or harsh speaking sounds
- 3) Living in homes with second-hand smoke or allergens or communities where there is air pollution
- 4) Medications or beverages which dry out the voice - diuretics, caffeine, decongestants, etc.
- 5) Smoking
- 6) Talking too much and too loud, yelling
- 7) Talking too little
- 8) Exhaustion
- 9) Emotional, physical, or sexual abuse
- 10) Inability to coordinate the tongue and throat to propel the sound of the singing voice while engaging the pharynx. (This can be taught!)
- 11) Confusion of gender modelling (Boys are sometimes confused about how their voices should sound and will often unconsciously attempt to imitate the low voices of adult males despite the fact that their vocal folds are simply too small to produce that low sound. Singing with children their own ages expands their options and enables them to match pitch more successfully when their voices change. I have had tremendous success with helping boys discover their singing voices by clearly explaining to them the difference between the range and size of boys' voices and men's voices.