

Healthy Vocal Habits for Young Singers

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INTRODUCTION

As choir directors, music teachers, and voice coaches, we are entrusted with the care of our singers' voices. When those singers are ten years old or even as young as seven, our concern should not only be for their immediate vocal health but also for the longevity of their developing voices. The following curriculum focuses on setting the basis for healthy vocal habits in young singers. It highlights important aspects of vocal technique each young chorister or soloist should be introduced to.

A FEW INITIAL THOUGHTS

- When teaching young singers it is crucial to use positive language when addressing improper vocal habits. Avoid words like “no”, “bad”, or “wrong” when describing the student's vocal technique. Ensure that your student understands you are working on “their voice” and you are not criticizing them as a person.
- When working with children on posture, breath, and tone use as much imagery as possible. Some helpful examples include “stand tall and noble”, “sing into your Dracula collar”, “picture a cathedral dome above your tongue at the back of your throat”, “your chest might feel like an open book.”
- Always have your student articulate back to you what they are thinking about when they are singing; this ensures you are using verbiage your student can connect with.
- Teach your students to sing by sensation opposed to by ear. Practice mouth positions without sound to encourage students to focus on the sensation of good technique.
- Approach one technical aspect at a time; giving too much information at once or working on too many issues at the same time will only confuse your young singers
- Always listen to the nuances of each individual voice and be prepared to adjust your teaching to encourage the most natural sound in each singer

BODY AWARENESS

- Introduce students to the body (show correct skeleton, pictures, etc.)
- Ensure each student “pictures” their body correctly (diaphragm, spine, divisions of torso, jaw, etc.)
- Allow students to experience the difference between tense, engaged, and relaxed muscles
- Show students the anatomy of their instrument (pictures, video clips, presentations)

POSTURE

- Highlight focus points on body that allow for “good” posture (feet, knees, chest, etc.)
- Explore a centered body with students (visuals, practice, observation)
- Focus on the need for “tall and noble” posture, chin position, and released jaw and neck muscles
- Practice “good” posture in various positions (seated, standing, with folder, etc.)

BREATH

- Introduce the process of breathing (visuals, practice, partner observation)
- Ensure students understand what happens during “Inhalation” and “Exhalation” (breathing cycle)
- Practice a low and silent breath (no shoulder movement, released abdominal muscles, expanded rib cage)
- Use simple vocal exercises that allow students to focus on breathing
- Practice inhaling with proper mouth position (preparation of initial vowel with released jaw)
- Allow students to explore expansion of the rib cage at the end of phrases
- Remember to begin with short exercises to encourage focus on breath; move to longer exercises to focus on sustaining the breath

TONE

- Allow students to explore open mouth positions
- Review position of jaw joint and “placement” of chin
- Practice inhaling through the initial vowel with space needed for first pitch
- Encourage use of space when singing (lifted soft palate)
 - imagery suggestions: space between back teeth, hot marshmallows, cathedral dome, yawn, etc.
- Make students aware of head and chest registers
 - Use descending “u” for building head voice, ascending “a” for building chest voice
 - Laughing like Santa Claus (chest voice) opposed to laughing like an elf (head voice)
- Allow students to find a relaxed and forward tongue position
- Ensure all vowels are created through tongue “placement” and mouth shape opposed to jaw tension (pay special attention to the “i” vowel)
- Practice crisp, yet fluid consonants; a consonant should never interrupt the legato line

VOCAL HYGENE

- Don't forget to teach your students how to take care of their voices
 - Refrain from excessive screaming
 - Always stay hydrated and rested
 - Stay away from drugs (smoking, etc)
 - Be aware of medications that affect your need for more water (antihistamine, decongestant, etc.)
- Know your choristers' voices and allow for vocal rest if vocal fatigue can be detected

HELPFUL VOACBULARY

Be aware of the language you are using to communicate with your young singers during lessons or rehearsals. Some phrases can have detrimental results to breath support and tone production. In general, avoid using the words “push” or “tension.” To give a more specific example, “sustain that note” allows for a more flowing breath support than “hold that note.” The word “energize” or “engage” allows for a better gaging of maximum volume than “sing louder.” “Release your muscles” will result in more energized posture than “relax your muscles.” “And lastly, singing with an “aligned” body is a more fitting description of our posture than a “straight” back.