Every Child a Singer: Techniques for Assisting Developing Singers

By Janice Smith

“Ms. Jones, my daughter’s taking violin lessons and her teacher suggested I contact you to see if you would teach Nanette to sing. Her teacher thinks it would improve her violin playing. Could you give her lessons after school for a while?” I smiled at the little girl standing beside her mother. Nanette was a slight, shy, and very soft-spoken child, yet serious about her Suzuki violin playing. She had played for her classmates and me earlier that month. I knew she was hesitant to sing in class and that she was a very conscientious and hardworking student. After asking her to sing any song that she knew and listening to her, I realized that she was having trouble singing on pitch, and I agreed to work with her.

Why Every Child Should Sing

Humans sing to express emotions beyond mere words. Making music transcends literal communication and expresses intense feelings that defy verbal description. Even very young children can, and do, express inexpressible feelings in song.

Singing is present in every culture. It provides a sense of community and belonging. Music is a component of cultural identity, and singing is the most basic musical expression. Once the rudiments are mastered, singing provides lifelong opportunities for musical experience and self-expression with minimal expense. Beyond that, singing—like all music—can be a source of joy, comfort, and emotional sensation. Singing is the birthright of every child with a normal speaking voice. Why, then, do some children not sing?

Why Some Children Need Help Singing

Lack of Experience. Many times, the simple answer to why children don’t sing is that, for a variety of reasons, they lack experience. Perhaps the adults in their home don’t sing. Maybe their singing was silenced at an early age by adults who didn’t want to hear them. Perhaps older siblings or their classmates laughed at their singing. And most unfortunately, when you ask many adults why they don’t sing, they tell you that a childhood music teacher told them to just “mouth the words” at some performance, so they stopped trying to sing.

For other children, their limited singing ability may be due to lack of exposure to good singing models. Much of the music children hear before starting school comes from popular media, and the range and style of this type of music don’t encourage proper vocal development. Even recordings marketed to children and their parents are often pitched too low for children’s smaller, immature vocal cords.

Many general music teachers lack a background in the child voice, so they pitch songs for their own comfort rather than that of their young singers. Some recordings that come with children’s music textbooks don’t consistently provide good vocal models in appropriate keys.

Lack of Confidence. Lack of confidence may be another reason a child won’t sing. This is particularly true of children who speak very softly and, as a result, try to sing too softly as well. For them, learning to sing is often a combination of developing better breath support and building confidence. Similarly, a child may not be interested in learning to sing. This lack of motivation often also stems from a lack of confidence.

A common perception is that musical talent is a prerequisite for singing. While a talent for spelling makes it easier to learn to spell and a talent for solving math problems makes mathematics easier, we don’t excuse children from spelling or math due to lack of talent.
Children should learn to sing the same way: by being taught how and then practicing.

**Auditory Processing Difficulties.** Children with auditory processing difficulties also have difficulty with accurate singing. Teachers who notice a child consistently singing around the pitch over a period of time might want to suggest to parents or resource room personnel that the child be tested for auditory processing difficulties. Early diagnosis may help prevent learning difficulties later (see Case Study 1).

**Hearing Impairments.** Children who are hearing impaired can often be taught to sing, depending on the degree of the impairment (see Case Study 2). Children with hearing impairments vary greatly in their abilities to hear. As with all children, teachers must be aware of these children's limitations to help them to achieve their vocal potential. There is no substitute for seeing children over a period of time and motivating them to work on learning to sing. Encouraging them and believing in their abilities, while acknowledging any disabilities, can help all children learn to use their singing voices.

**Other Physical Problems.** Children who do not have normal speaking voices will often have difficulty singing. In rare cases, a child may have a chronically hoarse voice, and a speaking voice that nearly always has a raspy edge to it. A hoarse voice can be caused by misuse of the voice by shouting a great deal, but it can also be the result of medication and things that cause sinus problems or other health issues. Young singers who have pushed their voices to be dangerously loud can have the same sort of problems. A chronic condition may result in permanent vocal damage, and parents should be directed to a speech specialist. A music teacher should not persist in trying to teach these children to sing in the upper register. Remind them not to sing if it hurts to do so. These children should bring a water bottle to class and use it as needed. While these children may desire to sing what the other children are singing, they will be physically unable to do so and can further damage their voices.

**Basic Technique**

Like any other musical skill, singing simply requires competent teaching and practice. Here are some of the basic areas

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Music teachers can help children develop the full range of their singing voices and use their speaking voices expressively as well.
Case Study 1: Auditory Processing Difficulties

Virginia, who loved music and music classes, had experienced singing in her home and started school as a willing singer. However, she sang consistently above the pitch. This continued into first and second grade despite her music teacher’s best efforts to help her. By third grade, it was clear that Virginia had a learning disability, and she was thoroughly tested as part of the special education identification process. She was diagnosed as having auditory processing difficulties. These difficulties were compounded when there were many competing sounds.

At about that same time, her music teacher became aware of a commercial product called Hearfones that singers can wear to make them more aware of their own singing voices. Hearfones are a little like headphones that you wear to listen to music, but they have clear plastic pieces by the singer’s cheeks that direct the sound to the earpieces (see www.hearfones.com for more information). When Virginia first put on this device, her singing immediately improved. She no longer sang consistently above the pitch. By wearing the device in chorus rehearsals, she was able to blend with the other children much of the time. Eventually she was able to hear herself without the device, but would occasionally wander off pitch. Her teacher created a signal whereby the teacher would gradually point to his left ear and look at Virginia if he heard her straying off pitch. Virginia would then subtly raise one finger to her ear and plug it momentarily to find her auditory bearings. She continued to enjoy being active in music organizations in school.

Posture. The critical foundation for accurate singing is proper posture or alignment. Proper posture can even be taught to very young children. Singing posture needs to be thought of in three positions. First position is rest position and is used while the teacher or other students are speaking and no one is singing. Second position is seated singing. The children should be sitting with their backs away from the back of their chairs, their shoulders over their hips, and their feet touching the floor. The head, shoulders, and spine should all be comfortably aligned. Their hands may be in their laps or holding the music. Third position is standing to sing. The feet should be about shoulder width apart, hands at the sides (or holding music, if necessary), rib cage raised, shoulders lowered, and chin parallel to the floor.

When teaching children proper posture, work on standing posture first. When most singers have mastered standing, begin to focus on seated singing. Asking young children to stand when they sing often makes the sound better simply because it improves their posture. This is sometimes less true for older children who can tend to slouch and may need to work more consciously on proper singing position. Many teachers use a system of hand signals or verbal cues to help their singers remember the three kinds of singing posture.

Breathing. Incorporate breathing exercises into the first few minutes of a lesson, class, or rehearsal. This helps young minds focus on the task at hand. Begin with an easy exercise such as sustaining a long hiss. Alternatively, start by asking for a ten-second (or an eight-count) hiss and gradually increasing the length of time that students are to hiss without taking a second breath. Another technique is to hiss for two minutes and take a breath whenever necessary. Once your singers perform these exercises effectively, do five-count hisses where they pulse the air for four counts and sustain the fifth.

When time and space allow, have children lie on the floor with a book placed on their abdomens just above the navel. Ask them to raise the book in the air as far as they can while inhaling and have them hold it for a few seconds. Gradually increase the amount of time they hold. Other times, ask them to raise the book on an inhale and sing a short song while keeping the book in place. This helps build an awareness of diaphragmatic support for singing with a stronger tone. Have them watch kittens, puppies, or babies who are sleeping (bring one to class or show a video), and notice the natural breathing process. Using these models, children learn to take a full breath without raising their shoulders. There are many other simple breathing exercises described in books on vocal pedagogy. (See the Resources sidebar.)

Warm-ups. The vocal cords benefit from being warmed up before being exercised. One of the simplest and fastest ways to accomplish this is to have the children echo sirens (glissan-

Case Study 2: Hearing Impairment

Early one fall, a parent came to see the music teacher, Ms. Jones, and reported that her little boy, Christopher, could not hear out of one ear. The parent wanted to be sure that Ms. Jones didn’t expect too much of Christopher, given his hearing limitations. Ms. Jones smiled and thanked her for the information. Christopher had been her student in kindergarten, and she hadn’t noticed anything unusual about him. He was now in first grade and could sing to about an A on the second space in the treble staff but was not using head voice (upper register) at all. His regular classroom teacher also sang with the class daily.

As the year went on, Christopher seemed to be having no difficulties with music-class activities. Ms. Jones was careful to speak directly to him and be sure that he understood her directions. By winter of second grade, Christopher had become a directional singer who was often accurate.

One morning before the winter holiday break, his mother once again came to see Ms. Jones. In a voice choked with emotion, she told Ms. Jones about listening to Christopher singing in the shower that morning and how she realized that he was singing “Jingle Bells” accurately and very well. She simply wanted to thank Ms. Jones for teaching him to sing. Again Ms. Jones smiled and told her she was welcome. Secretly, she knew that Christopher had basically taught himself to sing by doing the things they did in normal music classes.

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dos) produced by the teacher. With each repetition, increase the range of the siren. Another technique children enjoy as a warm-up is imitating the glissando sounds of a slide whistle. Begin first with downward slides, then alternating downward and upward slides, and finally slides that go both upward and downward randomly.

To build readiness for music reading, draw a wavy line on the board. Have the children vocally follow the line as you point and follow the contours. Invite children to draw a line and take turns being the “conductor,” varying the tempo as they trace the lines. The class must follow the conductor. The conductor can use a finger to point, but a laser pointer is a real asset for this activity. Eventually the lines can be drawn on a staff. These lines then can turn into noteheads. The children will have begun the transition to note-reading.

**Vocal Health.** An important rule when vocalizing is to do no harm. Repeatedly asking children to sing louder can lead to vocal damage. Shouting is not singing. Asking them to sing with better support may well have the same effect and may produce a better tone as well. Belting is out of place in an elementary classroom (or a young treble chorus).

Remind children not to sing if it hurts and to inform you when pain occurs. Illness is a valid excuse for not participating in singing activities. Singing with a sore throat is obviously detrimental. Allergies and other upper respiratory infections can also be problems. Interestingly enough, asthma may not be as much an issue for some students. Many children with asthma can learn to sing quite successfully by acquiring healthy breathing techniques. Again, teachers need to know their students and what is possible in each case.

As most music classrooms do not provide adequate drinking water for children who are singing, dehydration can become a problem. Classrooms with forced heat or air conditioning can cause vocal problems. In most cases, a child (or teacher) can manage a half-hour class without too many ill effects, but longer classes can cause vocal problems due to lack of moisture. This can be especially acute when children come to music classes after vigorous physical activity such as recess or physical education. They must have access to water before beginning music classes or singing will be less than successful. It may be helpful to run a humidifier in dry music classrooms where singing occurs regularly, but it is equally important to change the filter often to prevent problems with mold.

**Vocal Exploration**

There are creative ways to help children develop the full range of their

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**Resources**


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Singing voices and use their speaking voices expressively as well. Carl Orff advocated using expressive speech and chant as a way of developing children’s inherent musicality. For example, use stories such as “The Gingerbread Man” or “The Little Red Hen” with repetitive lines. In The Gingerbread Man by Jim Aylesworth, model the line “Run, run, run as fast as you can. You can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread Man!” in a high, light voice, and ask the children to imitate you. Each time the line occurs in the story, cue the students to respond in that same high speaking voice. Speaking in head voice or upper register will help children learn to sing in it.

In The Little Red Hen, children can use voices pitched high, medium, and low. “Not I,” can be spoken by the rat in a high voice, followed by the cat in a medium voice, and the dog in a low voice. Read the hen in a head voice and the children can echo the line, “Then I’ll do it myself” in their upper register each time. Another version is The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza. The illustrations feature a cat in a beret with a saxophone. Similar results can be achieved with older students by asking them to read the lyrics from their choral music expressively. At first you may demonstrate and ask the students to repeat your inflections.

Another technique that targets the upper part of children’s voices is “cat conversations.” Most children can imitate the meowing of a cat. A cat conversation is simply pretending to talk using meows. The teacher can demonstrate, possibly using the classroom teacher or other adult as a partner. This is particularly effective when first- or second-grade students are learning about question marks and periods and the difference in inflection those punctuation marks create. They can have fun identifying when the “cats” are asking questions or making statements. Then the children can pair off and “talk” to each other in cat conversations for a minute or two. With older children, try giving the “cats” a context to use. For example, the first cat is trying to sell something to the second cat.

Using the full range of the voice includes learning to switch quickly from one range to another. Whenever possible, start children in the upper register (head voice) and work downward. They will soon learn to make the transfer easily themselves. Seasonal sound effects can be incorporated in warm-ups. Fall and spring suggests making wind sounds on an “oo” vowel. October warm-ups could include ghost calls, witch laughter, bat squeaks, and monster roars. November suggests baby turkeys, mother turkeys, and father turkeys gobbling at high, medium, and low pitches. A similar set of sounds could move down using baby, mother, and daddy snowmen who laugh on “Ho, ho, ho!” at high, medium, and low pitches in winter months. Older students can use descending arpeggios and scales the same way.

Another fun activity that builds vocal flexibility and breath support is to “buzz” a song. Some voice teachers refer to this as lip trills. The idea is to make the lips vibrate in a loose and flappy sound while singing the pitches (but not the lyrics!) of a well-known song. This cannot be done without using good breath support or the lips simply will not “buzz.” At first, the children may dissolve into giggles, but with practice they will come to see how much air is required to do this (it is quite tiring). The teacher then guides the class to transfer this same sensation of support and airflow to their singing voices. The result is often a much improved tone and an expanded range. Additional ideas for vocal exploration can be found in John Feierabend’s The Book of Pitch Exploration: Can Your Voice Do This?

Individual-response songs and games also help young children match pitch. Solo singing should be a routine affair in the primary grades. This builds children’s confidence and allows teachers to assess their singing voices. Many elementary teachers take attendance by singing to individual children a phrase like “Hello, Susie” and asking Susie to reply, “Hello, Ms. Jones” on the same pitches. This may be extended to a sung conversation where you sing a question such as “What did you have for breakfast?” and the individual child sings a reply. Sing a follow-up question and the child replies. Here the child would not be using the same pitches as the teacher, but singing his or her own improvised responses. This “conversation” allows for some small measure of improvisation in a busy music classroom.

Individual response games such as “Doggie, Doggie, Where’s Your Bone?”, “We Are Dancing in the Forest while the Wolf Is Far Away,” and others typically included in children’s music series books allow teachers to hear voices individually. The playful aspects of these games encourage children to sing without being too self-conscious.

 Remedial Techniques

You can also work one-on-one with a student to improve his or her pitch. When trying to remediate the singing skills of an older child or young adult, it’s important to realize that this process can take anywhere from a few weeks to many months. All this work will be based on a sense of trust and security. The student must trust and like the teacher before any progress will be made. The student must also want to learn to sing. The motivation, interest, and natural skill of the student will largely determine how long it takes to achieve accuracy. As with any vocal activity, warm-ups and vocal exploration remain important and help the student relax and focus. Stretching exercises may also improve posture and breathing. This is particularly true of shoulder rolls and other exercises that stretch and relax the rib cage to facilitate proper breathing.

What can a singing teacher do with a student who has a very limited

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range? Start with a note the student can sing. Ask the student to sing a note and then sing it back to him or her. Ask the student to sing that note and hold it for five seconds, then ten seconds, then longer. Many unpitched singers don't use enough air to sustain a pitch (see the sidebar, What Is an Unpitched Singer?). Then ask the student to sing a different note and repeat this process. Another technique to try at this stage is to sing short rhythmic patterns on one note and see if the singer can echo the rhythms accurately.

Next, describe a four-step process to the student and try to implement it: (1) the student listens to the teacher sing a note, (2) the student thinks the sound inside his or her head, (3) the student sings it back to the teacher, (4) the student decides whether the sound was the same as the teacher's sound or not. If the student answers the last question incorrectly, provide the correct answer in a nonjudgmental manner and tone of voice. Repeat this process several times. For students who cannot identify their own errors after several sessions, try using a recording device and play the recording back to them. Repeat the same questions and see if they can answer more accurately. Often they can.

Provide feedback as before. This process is sometimes very helpful and also works well with the techniques described below.

Another dimension of this exercise involves the student discerning differences in pitch. Sing the student's preferred pitch and then another pitch, and ask the student if it is the same or different. Start with widely differing two-note intervals and gradually make the difference less pronounced. Again, provide feedback as to whether or not the student answered accurately and if not, the nature of the error. For example, "No, the two sounds were not the same. The second sound was higher than the first. Here they are again. [Sing both pitches.] Let's do another pair. Remember to think the sounds in your head before you answer." When the student can tell whether two tones are the same or different pitches, move on to distinguishing higher and lower and proceed in a similar manner.

The next step is to have the student echo two-note patterns. Add a note a whole step above the preferred pitch and have the student echo the two-note pattern. If this is not successful, try adding the minor third below to see if that is easier for the student. One of these patterns is likely to be successful eventually with most students. If the whole step is successful, add another whole step below that and try to create patterns using mi, re, and do. Similarly, if the descending minor third is successful, attempt sol, mi, and la patterns. Regardless of which pattern is initially more successful, add the other pattern once the initial patterns are accurately replicated on most attempts. Once five-note patterns are successful, use range-extension exercises until these patterns can be sung in any key.

All these techniques are based on echoing a human voice, not a musical instrument. Do not play piano or any other instrument with these exercises, or the student may become dependent on the instrument and be unable to sing independently. The best model for human singing is a human voice that can sing in the same range as the student. Adolescent changed voices and adult male students will more than likely reproduce a male model more accurately than a female model or a piano. Similarly, children will more accurately reproduce another child's voice or a female voice.

Using a device that transmits their own voice more directly into one ear helps many unpitched singers. One inexpensive device is a flexible piece of tubing such as a vacuum cleaner hose. The student holds one end near an ear and the other in front of the mouth while singing. PVC pipe elbows can also be used. Sometimes good results can be achieved by having the student cup one hand behind an ear and the other cupped in front of the mouth with the fingers pointing toward the ear with cupped hand behind it. This also directs the sound, although not as fully as the hose.

Even though it may seem counterintuitive, using more energy and

### What Is an Unpitched Singer?

For this article, unpitched singers are children who can sing, including some who sing in their head voice (or upper register) range above the A on the second space of the treble staff (\( \frac{4}{4} = 440 \)), but who do not match pitch accurately with other singers. Mary Ellen Junda suggests that there are four kinds of unpitched singers:

- **Above-the-pitch singers** sing consistently in head voice and above the correct pitches of the song—often far above the correct pitches.

- **Directional singers** sing upward when the melody goes up and downward when the melody goes down but often miss the correct pitch.

- **Out-of-tune singers** do not follow even the correct direction of the melody.

- **Transposing-pattern singers** sing the correct interval pattern but on the wrong starting pitch.

Building on this research, two more classifications could be added:

- **Dependent singers** can sing accurately with a group, but not alone.

- **Emerging singers** can sing accurately by themselves but are sometimes inaccurate when singing with a group. This last classification seems to be found mostly in younger children who have not had as much group singing experience.

breath often improves singers who consistently sing above the pitch. Another technique to try with above-the-pitch singers is to do downward glissandos and then downward glissandos that stop on a specific pitch. Having these students plug one ear often improves their pitch by allowing them to hear themselves more accurately.

Learn to Sing by Singing

That every child can be a singer is a philosophical stance. If, as music educators, we do not teach children how to sing well, who will? It is the responsibility of every music educator to learn the basics of vocal tone production and acquire a repertoire of skills to teach children how to sing accurately and well. Professional music education organizations sponsor conferences and workshops that frequently include sessions on the child voice. Teachers can attend these sessions, make note of suggested resources, and educate themselves. Taking voice lessons with a sensitive teacher can improve teachers' understanding of how their own voices work. The principles of posture, breathing, warm-ups, vowel formation, and relaxation apply equally well to children's singing. Listening to recordings of outstanding children's choirs and observing their rehearsals is essential. Once a music educator has an understanding of how children sound when they sing well and how they produce that sound, they can work with children who need additional help.

Singing is a human birthright. It is also a teachable skill. The more opportunity children have to sing, the better they will sing. The better they sing, the more they will enjoy singing and music making of many kinds. This can result in richer and more emotionally satisfying experiences throughout their lives.

Notes