I'm sure we'd all agree that the role of a parent goes far beyond providing a child with the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, and shelter. Indeed, the parental nurturing role includes showing love, care and understanding as well as offering protection, discipline, and direction. The parent must also be an educator, for the child needs to learn, among other things, communication skills, manners, and an understanding of right and wrong.

For me, teaching singing to children is also a nurturing process that, in addition to the development, early in life, of fundamentally sound vocal technique, includes many of the aforementioned responsibilities. A concern for the singer as well as the singing has led me to call this approach to pedagogy vocal parenting.

This vocal parent believes the training of young singers must begin where the act of singing begins, and that is in the mind of the singer. Since attitude strongly influences physical behavior, it follows then that attitude needs to be considered a primary component of vocal technique. Developing a positive attitude as well as creating efficient vocal technique can be enhanced through role-playing and storytelling. These strategies enable the teacher and student to establish vocal equilibrium and balance through the exploration of the full spectrum of sound-supporting and sound-producing possibilities.

Take, for example, posture. We know good posture brings the body into proper alignment in preparation for singing and speaking. A shy, self-conscious child, however, will often feel very uncomfortable when put into good postural alignment because the alignment does not fit the child's self-image. To pursue correct posture doggedly without first addressing the child's attitude toward posture is an exercise in frustration for both teacher and student.

Role-playing or storytelling, on the other hand, allows children to explore and experience aspects of vocal technique in contexts that make the learning a more natural process. Our shy, self-conscious child, for example, could be asked to portray several characters, each with contrasting postures. The child could be encouraged to role-play a soldier.
standing at attention in an exaggerated, stiff military posture with shoulders arched backwards and chest excessively high. The child then could transform into a very old man, hunched over with shoulders down and chest collapsed. Next, the child might try to play the role of a king or queen standing confidently tall and regal before his or her subjects.

By exploring the extremes of posture, the child is, in essence, framing what good posture should be. The extremes, when compared with each other, point to the middle and thus point to the equilibrium we desire for efficient body alignment.

It is critical that the teacher participate in the role-playing and storytelling process. The child/student can quickly sense the atmosphere in a vocal studio. A teacher who is not willing to lead by example risks having the child feel manipulated like a puppet on a string. If, on the other hand, the teacher by his or her actions says, “We’re in this together,” the child is likely to be more willing to respond freely and openly.

The dynamics of role-playing and storytelling serve other aspects of vocal instruction as well. Breathing, for example, can be modeled by the teacher as both a physical and attitudinal activity. By role-playing a very tense person who exhibits the kind of shallow, high chest, or clavicular breathing that so often accompanies such a mind set, the teacher can show the child why that kind of breathing is not the best form of breath management.

The teacher can then swing to the opposite extreme and model the fill-up-like-a-balloon-and-crowd-the-lungs breather who tries to take in as much air as possible.

With balance properly framed by the extremes, the teacher can then demonstrate a confident, self-assured individual who breathes using the technique of appoggio, the dynamic balancing of inspiratory and expiratory middle and lower torso musculature. Next, the teacher can go back and lead the child through the three breathing role-plays, all the while explaining, within the child’s limits of learning, what the breathing system is doing.

Any parent, vocal or otherwise, should not need to be reminded that a “just do it” command to a child rarely, if ever, is effective. It is important that we give our students good reasons for what we ask them to do. “Whys?,” “How comes?,” and “Huh?” need to be addressed.

Let’s examine, for example, vocal registers. If a teacher of singing tells a child that he or she needs to vocalize in both her upper and lower (“head” and “chest”) registers and the child has a strong preference for one or the other register, a “Why?” or a “How come?” will probably be forthcoming. Explaining to the child that exercising both registers will make the whole voice stronger, including the “belt” voice, will set the stage for demonstrating two-register and cross-register vocalizations.

If the young singer is, let’s say, a dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying “Annie” school-of-singing belter, the teacher can ask the child to sing “Happy Birthday” first in her own style and then as if she were a famous opera singer. The teacher may need to model for the child the fuller upper-register quality associated with the female operatic voice, making sure the key is high enough for the child not to be tempted to belt. The contrast in sound, physical sensation, and self-perception may initially disturb the singer (“That’s not me” is a common response). But if the child is assured that this vocal production is in addition to and not in place of the belt singing, then the child may come to realize the value, both technically and artistically, of having a “whole” voice that is coordinated and connected from the lowest to the highest notes.

Creativity in vocal technique can also help to develop a cooperative attitude toward the exploration of vowel sounds. The child might be asked to experience the extremes of vowel coloration via exercises such as animal impersonations. For example, a “baa” in the role of a sheep can demonstrate significant nasality and tonal brightness, while a “moo” in the imitation of a cow can show how deep and dark a vowel can be. The vocal parent/teacher can then send the “sheep” and “cow” for singing lessons so the child learns to bring the exaggerated “baa” and “moo” into a more balanced treble and bass tonality. Producing beautiful tones becomes easier for the child who has discovered that balanced vowels do not exist at the extremes of the vowel spectrum.

With over 50% of my private students under the age of 18, I often have singers going through the adolescent voice change or mutational period. At this time, the kids really need the help of a vocal parent. Contrary to past thinking that suggested adolescents stop singing completely during the change, it is my experience and that of many other pedagogues that the soon-to-be young adult should keep singing through the mutational period so rapidly growing muscles continue to be strengthened and coordinated. I tell the boys especially, “Bigger
Critical to a smooth voice change is the ongoing development and coordination of both the lower and upper vocal registers. Although they may experience a temporary narrowing of their vocal range, the kids must be encouraged to keep singing using their whole voice. They must be patient and go where their voice leads them. They must never try to speed up or retard the voice change process. With continuing work on vocal technique, the mutational period can be a minor annoyance rather than a major upheaval.

Now, a word about repertoire: age-appropriate should be the guiding term. Certainly a young child might be able to role-play the prostitute’s plea in the Cole Porter song, “Love for Sale,” and some parents might find it cute that their 4-year-old daughters try to dress, act, and sing like the pop diva, Madonna; but do we really want her or them to do it? I, for one, do not. Mine may be a minority opinion, but I prefer children to speak and sing in the context of their age groups. Suitable and appropriate repertoire does exist that matches the vocal and emotional tessituras of children of all ages.

For example, Broadway shows such as The Sound of Music, Oliver, Annie, The Secret Garden, and Bye, Bye, Birdie contain a wealth of vocal material for children and adolescents. Hal Leonard Publishing has collected some of this material in the Kids’ Broadway Songbook. Alberta Keys Music Publishing in Great Falls, Montana, and Canada offers wonderful new music for children to sing. Joan Frey Boytim has edited Solo Vocal Repertoire for Young Singers: An Annotated Bibliography (National Association of Teachers of Singing [NATS] Publication) as a source for youthful vocal repertoire, and Richard Row has a collection called The Young Singer (R. D. Row Music) that contains excellent classical songs. Walt Disney, of course, continues to provide volumes of tunes appropriate for children of all ages.

Finally, my role as a vocal parent encompasses a concern for the physical and mental well-being of my students. I continually stress the importance of proper diet and fluid intake as well as the need for adequate exercise and rest. In addition, I also encourage students to seek out supportive environments that will nurture their creative souls.

I take great pride and pleasure in teaching children how to sing and categorically disagree with the old spouse’s claim that training young voices will surely damage them. As long as teachers remember that they are working with immature minds and bodies, the benefits of competent vocal training will far outweigh any potential deficits. How rewarding it is when young singers finally discover that their improved vocal technique actually has a positive influence on the way they sing their songs. They delight in the fact that notes are easier to hit, phrases are easier to sustain, and emotions are easier to express.

The kids do need and want our help and guidance. I sincerely hope more of my pedagogical colleagues will join me in this worthwhile endeavor. Frankly, it can be a lot of fun doing animal impersonations with the kids!