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Kids are Singers, Too

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Yet another phone call from a parent to this teacher's studio begins with, "I've heard that a child's voice can be aged if you start singing lessons too early; but my child sings all the time, and she's now asking for lessons. What's your opinion?"

My opinion remains the same as it was when I began teaching almost twenty years ago: If a child has talent and a strong desire to learn how to sing better, then instruction by a knowledgeable singing teacher will strengthen the vocal mechanism rather than harm it. Furthermore, the early establishment of efficient vocal technique will both accelerate the development of the voice and diminish the potential for bad habits to interfere with that development. This opinion, however, is not universally shared among NATS members. In fact, it may still be the minority opinion. One thing is for certain, the subject of when to begin voice lessons continues to be a controversial topic.

Writing in support of early voice training are laryngologists and fellow NATS Journal contributors Dr. Robert T. Sataloff and Dr. Joseph R. Spiegel. In the January / February 1989 LaryngoS COPE column, they state: "Certainly it is possible and proper to train young voices to sing. Moreover, it is reasonable to begin this training as soon as a youngster shows a serious interest in and

aptitude for voice performance. However, the training should be directed toward avoiding voice abuse and toward gradual development of vocal musculature and control." Renowned laryngologist, Dr. Friedrich S. Brodnitz, on the other hand, pleads for a postponement of formal training until girls reach the age of sixteen and boys, the age of seventeen. He adds, however, in his November / December 1983 NATS Bulletin article: "Of course, singing lessons by an experienced teacher cannot do any harm if he holds back the ambition of the young student. But even then it should be done with the greatest caution, and any strenuous performing during the years of vocal maturation should definitely be discouraged."

One of the parents calling this studio had just had a discussion with a voice and piano teacher who shared Dr. Brodnitz's view regarding postponing instruction. The parent's nine year old child was studying piano with this teacher and inquired about studying voice as well. The teacher stated she took no one under the age of fourteen because their voices could be damaged. Her concern seemed to be the fragility of the vocal mechanism vis-a-vis structured, systematic voice training.

The parent was concerned and confused. She had listened to the teacher's explanation but had also heard good and healthy singing

from two of my young singers who were in a summer theater program with her daughter.

“What do you do at a voice lesson with a young child?” the parent asked. I stated that, first and foremost, there must be talent. I explained to her that vocal talent is an innate gift. The singing teacher’s job is to develop technical and artistic skills so that the innate talent can be harnessed and placed at the command of the singer.

The key to teaching children how to sing is to keep both technique and repertoire age-appropriate. Young minds and muscles are constantly growing. As in other disciplines, voice pedagogy needs to keep pace with that growth.

Posture and breathing techniques, for example, can be taught by using the most basic of physical directions. Explanations of sternums, intercostal muscles, and diaphragms can wait. Talk of chests, ribs, and tummies will suffice.

Vocally, simple triads and scales sung in both the lower (“chest”) and upper (“head”) registers will increase strength and flexibility while developing disciplined and systematic practice habits. Those same scales and triads can be put to use to explore the many sounds the human voice can make as we do exercises such as barnyard animal impersonations. Cows (and kids), for example, have heavy voices when they “moo,” and goats have light voices when they “baaa.”

Coordination of the registers can be facilitated if the child first deliberately sings as if each register is a separate person with a separate sound. For example, the “chest” voice person could be at one time a whiny, nasal singer, and the “head” voice person could be an old lady with a hooty, hollow sound. The child is then asked to make both the “head” and “chest” to sound like one of those persons, first the whiny one, then the hooty, hollow one. The next step would be to move toward a more beautiful and balanced sound in both registers.

Teaching children age-appropriate voice technique logically leads to age-appropriate repertoire. We can thank Walt Disney for commissioning songwriters to create marvelous material for children. Take, for example, the wonderful songs “Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo” from *Cinderella* and “Supercalifragilistic...” et al. from *Mary Poppins*. These songs require vocal facility, fast articulation, and much enthusiasm. Opportunities for legato singing with challenging intervals can be found in songs such as “Someday My Prince Will Come” from *Snow White* and “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” also from *Cinderella*. And yes, there can be *Annie* songs if vocal efficiency, coordination, and strength are already established.

Each teacher will, of course, personalize the definition of what is age-appropriate vocal technique and repertoire. There will be some who will err too much on the side of caution, vocalizing a mere octave of the voice and limiting repertoire to “Do Re Mi” from *The Sound of Music*. Other teachers will perceive the children as “little adults” and push young minds and muscles to artistic and vocal extremes that invite damage. It is this teacher’s fervent hope that the latter pedagogy especially will eventually constitute the very smallest of teaching philosophies.

Teaching children to sing is both a joy and a serious responsibility. Setting reasonable limits on what they can and cannot do helps channel their enthusiasm and builds stepping stones for them to use as they ascend the mountain of vocal technique and vocal repertoire. This teacher strongly believes that those who start the climb early and properly prepared have a definite advantage over those who start later. 