

Teacher Health

Look after your voice

We speak to a real expert in making the most of your voice while making sure you don't build up problems for the future.

One of the most easily overlooked tools of the teacher's profession is their voice. It's all too easy to take for granted your ability to speak to your class. But statistically, teachers represent a high risk group for voice loss and a recent survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers suggested that 68% of the teaching population in Primary School would suffer voice problems at some time.

Take a moment to think about your own voice. How much time do you spend actually speaking, whether in the classroom or socially? Do you ever feel a little hoarse at the end of a teaching day? Is your throat dry or scratchy? Do you clear your throat lots? Do things improve when you have a holiday?



vocal problems and how to avoid them. Janet was a head of music at a school in Buckinghamshire for five years, during which time she became aware of her voice use. Janet left teaching to become a classical singer and this gave her access to vocal techniques which she now feeds back into her voice management programme.

Janet set up Talking Voice to help address some of the problems teachers face and to increase awareness and offer solutions for trainee and

established teachers in managing their voice through the tough vocal load that comes with the profession.

"Most teachers have not had access to any vocal health or training and go into the job with enthusiasm and passion for educating, but give no thought as to how much they will be using their voice" says Janet.

"When I look at what I have learnt over the years as a performer and vocal coach, I have gained this huge body of knowledge about the voice and I also know how traumatic it is to have a voice dysfunction. I have not forgotten the isolation and anxiety attached to trying to make your voice work and having to contend with hoarseness and a constant ache in your throat."

"I believe it is extremely important that teachers become aware of how to create flexibility in their voice and how to look after what is, of course, the tool of the trade. Primary Teachers in particular seem more prone to voice issues. This could be that they talk more all day because they don't have any non contact periods and because there is a tendency to match with the voices around them, which belonging to children, are naturally higher. This means teachers speak out of their natural range, putting additional strain on the larynx."

"Issues faced by teachers range from the usual cold and fatigue, to the more serious conditions such as hoarseness which doesn't disappear over a couple

of weeks and loss of strength or pitch range. It affects not only your working life but your social life."

Why are teachers more at risk than say somebody who works in a noisy shop or factory?

"For other workers there can be problems with voice – those who use the telephone all day, people working in noisy environments or professional singers who are using extreme methods to get loud sound, but teachers have several unique factors which add into the mix. Perhaps the least thought about is that as



a teacher, you are in performance mode in front of a class. I don't mean you have to be a big personality, always laughing and being loud – although the teachers who are like that are some of the first to feel the strain; but there is a pressure to deliver, all those eyes looking at you expectantly (if you are lucky!) and if you are not used to that or comfortable with that, you will carry tension around in your body which will show itself by tension in the shoulders or holding the breath. Teachers also often use their voices to discipline and talk above noise. Classrooms are not acoustically very friendly and in a big space a teacher is likely to push to fill it for example. There is just the amount of time spent using the voice and to be honest, a lot of teachers find it extraordinary to really use the full range of expression in their voice, so stay around a couple of pitch intervals instead of really exploring the full range, which can feel alarming, yet when you hear somebody else doing it, it is remarkably natural and, crucially, keeps you listening. Using a fuller range makes you more likely to engage

with the other aspects of voice and after all, you want the students to be looking forward to spending time with you. Teachers are prone to more colds and coughs because they are surrounded by them in a closed space and always return to work before they are fully fit, that's if they take time off at all!"

"Pupils cannot always hear the teacher if they don't project their voice well enough or if there is other background noise and a child who has maybe as yet undiagnosed glue ear for example, is not going to ask the teacher to repeat themselves, they will just make up what they thought the teacher said. Final consonants disappear over distance and sound travels on vowels, so the knowledge of extending the vowel a bit in any word helps slow down the speech and keeps the sound travelling to the back of the room. Many teachers just talk too fast and don't allow students time to assimilate what has been said and process it."

Janet is keen to point out that her training highlights the many aspects of using the voice and although awareness and strengthening the mechanisms around the voice are emphasised, she also wants teachers to try out different vocal colours and become aware of the extraordinary instrument which we all take for granted.

"If I had to sum up how my workshops impact, I would say that first of all, people have a better time than they might anticipate. The practical sessions always get really positive feedback, they are inevitably fun and when you physicalise the theory, you are more likely to take it away and use it. Secondly, people know a lot more about vocal function and health when they leave and thirdly and most importantly, I ask that everybody takes away at least three things they can use immediately to start a new habit which will help them preserve their voice for a long and fruitful career. My website, www.talkingvoice.net, has downloadable resources and lots of information and contact details if somebody has a question or problem. Unlike singers who are constantly monitoring their voices, teachers miss the first vital signs of fatigue which indicate a need to alter voice use. It is balance of getting to know your own voice and its extraordinary capabilities, while acknowledging its delicacy too"



Thank you very much to Janet Shell for helping us put together this piece. If you would like to contact Janet or her company Talking Voice you can call her on 01932 242805 or 07730 409648 or email her on janet@talkingvoice.net. Her website is www.talkingvoice.net where you can find out all about her courses and workshops.

Janet's five top tips for voice care

- 1. Drink more water.** I know we hear that all the time, but overall hydration levels matter. Your vocal cords do not get direct access to fluid, sitting at the top of the windpipe, so how hydrated an individual is, will have repercussions on dryness in the throat. Also opening your mouth more will dry it out faster!
- 2. Breathe in before speaking to a larger group.** Avoid raising your shoulders! Projected speech is not the same as close speech and needs more air flow. Feel the air on the back of your throat and breathe through your mouth. This is a tricky one to remember, but expanding your ribcage and feeling the air drop into your lungs gives you a moment to relax the vocal apparatus before the next words. Nobody will notice that you have done it and breathing well also calms any nerves. If faced with a tricky situation or even in an interview, focussing on your breath will soothe your body's natural reaction to stress which is flight or fight!
- 3. Imagine a row of dots at the back of the room and aim your voice for those.** You want to think about where your speech is ending up, not where it is beginning. While you do that, check you are not raising your chin or thrusting your chin forward as this puts a strain on the larynx - so you have to let the sound go away from you rather than chase after it. Think of it leaving your mouth in an arc and smile internally to raise the roof of your mouth which will give you more space. Even thinking of the sound behind your front teeth will help send it forward.
- 4. An upright, open posture** not only gives the basis for good speech, but it communicates intention and authority without aggression. For a guide on what that looks like, visit the website, but in essence you need to balance your skeleton with your head freely moving at the top of the spine. Try feeling your shoulders sitting over your ribs and your ears over your shoulders while keeping the back of the neck long and then relax into that position rather than holding yourself stiffly to attention! Keep the neck. Maybe "bob" your head a bit gently to see how it feels.
- 5. Warm the voice up before you start a day of teaching.** A suggested warm up routine is on the website, but you can make up your own! You don't have to sing! Just waking up the facial muscles and tongue and gently humming are a start. You could sigh, increasing the height of the sigh each time; go through each vowel several times, start quiet and get louder or phonate (make a sound) a nursery rhyme to the following sounds - "sh" "p" "ss". Breathe first! You can find a variety of things to do.