

Handout

Talking about ... Voice Disorders

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WHAT IS A VOICE DISORDER?

Voice is the sound produced by vibration of the vocal folds (or vocal cords) in the larynx (voice box). A voice disorder occurs when the vocal folds do not vibrate well enough to produce a clear sound.

WHAT CAUSES A VOICE DISORDER?

Yelling or making loud “play” sounds, throat clearing, and excessive coughing can cause a voice disorder. These voice behaviors cause the vocal folds to close hard against each other, causing blister-like bruises. These bruised areas can harden into callus-like bumps called vocal nodules. Other causes of voice disorders can include the following:

- Subglottic stenosis (narrowing of the airway)
- Vocal fold paralysis (immobility of one or both vocal folds)
- Vocal fold cysts (fluid-filled sac)
- Granuloma (area of inflammation in tissue due to injury)
- Papilloma (wart-like growths)
- Laryngeal web (band of tissue between vocal folds)

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A VOICE DISORDER?

The child with a voice disorder may have several of the following voice characteristics:

- Hoarseness
- Breathiness
- Raspiness
- Harshness
- Volume that is too loud or too soft
- Pitch that is too high or low for age
- Running out of air before the end of a sentence

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR A VOICE DISORDER?

Some voice disorders are treated by medication or surgery. Other voice disorders can be treated with voice therapy. Voice therapy consists of learning new patterns of voice production and eliminating old ones. Some of the therapy includes these:

- Identifying and eliminating harmful voice patterns (such as yelling, screaming and making superhero sounds)
- Improving vocal health by increasing water intake and avoiding caffeine
- Using specific voice exercises designed to balance and strengthen the vocal folds and other muscles of the larynx
- Learning to use the new voice production in everyday communication

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP?

The purpose of voice therapy is to teach your child a new way to produce voice. For this skill to improve, the child should practice the voice exercises daily. The family members should also look at their own voice use. Changing your own voice and reinforcing positive voice behaviors will serve as a good model for your child.

The following activities can help your child improve his or her vocal skills:

- Do not yell to communicate.
- Drink plenty of water and avoid soft drinks or coffee.
- Encourage “voice naps.” For example, play a game without any words. This helps your child give his or her voice a rest.
- Reward your child when he or she uses the “better” voice, or practices good vocal health. Telling your child about his or her good voice habits is much more effective than complaining about poor voice habits.

WEBSITES FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Center for Pediatric Voice Disorders, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center: <http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/service/p/voice-disorders/default/>
- Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center Health Topic on voice disorders: <http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/health/info/speech/diagnose/voice-disorder.htm>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/voice.htm>
- Division of Speech-Language Pathology, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center: www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech