

## Taking care of your voice: Pro-active strategies to support your most powerful teaching tool

by Katelyn Mansfield, Speech-Language Pathologist

During an ordinary school day, teachers are accustomed to using their voice all day, often in classrooms with less than ideal acoustics and competing noise. In fact, speaking is such a large portion of the workday that teachers are considered professional voice users. The ability to use your voice is fundamental to what you do. For this reason, teachers have some of the highest voice demands and are at a greater risk for developing voice problems.

### Recognizing a Voice Problem

At some point, you have likely experienced temporary voice difficulties such as hoarseness after a bad cold or cheering loudly at an event. With time and rest your voice is generally able to recover. However, when difficulties continue to persist or worsen, this could indicate a voice problem. It is important to recognize the early signs and symptoms to avoid long-term difficulties. Indicators of a potential voice problem may include:

- Unwanted or unexpected changes in how your voice sounds (e.g. hoarseness).
- Requiring more effort to speak.
- Running out of breath when speaking.
- Discomfort or tension in your throat.
- Experiencing the frequent need to cough or throat clear.

### Protecting Your Voice

The good news is that there are habits that can be practiced to help keep your voice strong and well. Just like eating healthy or exercising, small daily habits can have positive impact over time. As an educator, what can you do to protect your voice?

### Control factors that can lead to voice problems.

- Reduce background noise by closing the door to your classroom.
- Position yourself closer to your students when speaking.
- Find non-vocal ways to get your students attention (e.g. clapping).
- Take voice breaks when you can.
- Focus on good posture.
- Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

**Reduce or eliminate behaviours that put strain on your voice.** We all do things that are not always ideal for our voice, sometimes without realizing it. Here are some things to be mindful of:

- Reduce throat clearing. Try sipping on water.
- Avoid frequent and prolonged yelling, cheering and whispering.
- Don't force your voice. Using a voice amplification device can be helpful.
- Focus on taking a good breath before speaking.

### Pay attention to changes in your voice.

A change in the quality of your voice such as how it sounds or feels should be monitored, especially when it is in the absence of a cold.

**Seek help from a professional if you are concerned about your voice.** Talk with your doctor to determine if a referral to an ENT (Ear, Nose, and Throat) doctor is needed. An ENT can rule out underlying factors. Also arrange to see a Speech-Language Pathologist. They are trained in the assessment and treatment of voice problems.

Prevention is key to avoid long-term voice difficulties. Simply picking a few strategies to gradually implement over time can have a long lasting impact. The strategies that are practiced today can help your voice tomorrow. Even while teaching from home during these unprecedented times, as a teacher, your voice is vital. It is your most powerful teaching tool.

For more information on recognizing and treating voice difficulties, visit: <https://www.sac-oac.ca/sac-resource-page-voice>

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