



# AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

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## TEACHING CHILDREN TO SING

### A Statement by the American Academy of Teachers of Singing November 2002

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From their first cry at birth to their last sigh at death, human beings are sound-producing creatures. We know from numerous clinical studies that respiration and phonation occur at birth. Intonation (humming, cooing, squealing, laughing) normally develops in the first four months of life. Articulation and the first words occur at about one year of age. Before a child is two years old, two-word combinations are being used.

Analysis of such data reveals that the necessary elements for singing – respiration, phonation, resonance, and articulation – are in place at a very early age. It follows then that the opportunity to teach children to sing more efficiently and expressively can also occur at a very early age. There continues to this day, however, a controversy as to when, and even if, the training of young singers should begin. The **American Academy of Teachers of Singing** addresses the topic of teaching children to sing.

Acutely aware of the physical damage improper, excessive, or ill-advised singing can cause, the Academy in the past has recommended that children not engage in formal voice studies. However, upon further investigation, no scientific, pedagogical, or physiological evidence indicates that child voice pedagogy is inherently harmful to children's bodies, minds, or spirits.

The Academy now recognizes that there are benefits to teaching children to sing. In fact, well-trained singers of any age are less likely than untrained singers to hurt their vocal instruments or to allow their instruments to be hurt by others. Observing our fellow pedagogues in dance and instrumental music, we find they have identified and successfully acted on the potential to instruct interested and motivated young children in their respective disciplines. Clearly, these teachers have developed age-appropriate technical exercises and repertoire that challenge but do not overly tax the young body and mind. They are astutely aware that children are not "miniature adults," and should not be taught as such.

The Academy believes that teachers of singing should take their cue from the aforementioned colleagues to develop and utilize age-appropriate vocal exercises and repertoire that support the natural inclination of children to express themselves in singing and song. The quantity and quality of musical talent as well as the interest of each child, however, will vary greatly. Therefore, the Academy suggests three general categories of child singer:

**Category one** includes children for whom singing is but one activity to which they are exposed along with other disciplines such as mathematics, science, history, language, physical education, art, dance, and spirituality. For them, gaining an appreciation of and experience in the recreational joy of singing may be sufficient. Venues where this exposure occurs include home, school, and places of worship.

**Category two** includes children for whom singing is a recreational activity they wish to pursue more intensely. These children may express an interest in private voice lessons to improve basic vocal technique and develop repertoire. Venues include select choirs and choruses, and solo opportunities at school, clubs, sporting events, and places of worship.

**Category three** includes children for whom singing is a professional or pre-professional activity that subjects their vocal technique, performance skills, and repertoire to highly critical evaluation and scrutiny. For these children to deal successfully with the added physical and emotional demands a singing career requires, formal voice training should be considered a necessity. Venues include opera, music theater, recording, pageants, film, radio, and television.

Regardless of the categories of the singers, training should be in the hands of qualified teachers who understand both **how** to teach children and **what** to teach children. A basic knowledge of child vocal anatomy and physiology, age appropriate vocal technique and repertoire, and child psychology is essential for successful instruction. Teachers must know, for example, that a child's vocal instrument cannot sustain the larger and fuller tonal spectra adult vocal instruments are capable of producing. Teachers must also avoid repertoire that exceeds the physical, intellectual, and emotional understanding of the young student singer.

Critical to the pedagogical process is the establishment of a child-friendly learning environment. Elements such as posture, breath management, phonation, resonance, articulation, and interpretive skills need to be addressed in a patient, creative, and playful manner. Using standard pedagogical tools such as lip and tongue trills, scales, triads, and arpeggios, the singing teacher must endeavor to create exercises that resemble games rather than repetitive drills. For example, abdominal breathing activity can be explored by having the child "pant like a dog." Scales and other vocalises can be done using numbers, colors, names, or even items found in the studio. Role play and storytelling suggestions ("be a happy singer," or "pretend you are saying something very important") can help to focus the exercises by providing a context for their use. As lessons continue, the instructor must be sensitive to the growing and changing bodies and minds of the child singers, closely monitoring them to see if the students are singing within or beyond their vocal and emotional limitations. This is especially true during male puberty since rapid physical growth can radically alter and even temporarily destabilize the vocal instrument.

Important, too, is a willingness to work with the child's preference in music. Not all children wish or need to sing classical repertoire. Therefore, the teacher may need to address nonclassical singing styles such as music theater, pop, rock, jazz, gospel, Latino, country, rhythm and blues, and folk music, and provide vocal techniques to authentically support these and other vocal music categories. No matter what the vocal style, however, teachers need to remind their young students not to imitate the fuller, more mature adult voices they hear, but to develop a vocal sound that suits their own age, voice, and personality.

Since children are not independent beings, teachers must be able to effectively communicate with parents and guardians regarding their child's training, choice of repertoire, and potential for growth. Adults pushing unwilling young singers into training and performance environments need to be tactfully confronted and encouraged to let the children participate in the decision-making process.

In summary, singing is a natural and spontaneous activity for a majority of children. The **American Academy of Teachers of Singing** supports and encourages the teaching of children to sing. As in other activities in which youngsters are involved, singing can be accomplished on many levels from recreational to professional. At all levels, however, there should be qualified instructors willing and able to help young singers on their musical journeys.