

Vocal Health for Teachers

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Spoken communication is negatively impacted when wearing a mask. The decibel output is reduced (by 3 - 12 dB), and higher frequency speech sounds (2000-7000 Hz) are diminished, resulting in muffled speech. Visual cues such as articulation and facial expression used by listeners to fill in context are concealed. Many students are also at risk of missing information as they often rely on the teacher's movement and expression to sustain their focus.

To compensate for these challenges, educators are at a high risk of forcing their voices, creating vocal fatigue and possible injury. The following are some ways to protect your voice, improve speech intelligibility, and compensate for lost facial cues.

Protect Your Voice

1. **Avoid vocal abuse such as speaking too loudly** or using harsh glottal onsets at the beginning of words.
2. **Remember good vocal hygiene.** Hydrate throughout the day and reduce behaviors that cause reflux.
3. **Become aware of your habitual speaking voice** - that comfortable and easy range you usually speak in. Take time to use the sliding exercises below to increase pitch flexibility and be sure **not to press the voice** uncomfortably when attempting to be heard.

Improve Speech Intelligibility

1. **Speak at a slower rate of speed** - breathe!
2. **Reduce extraneous environmental sounds** as much as possible or consider the use of amplification.
3. **Become aware of word boundaries** – these are the sounds that begin and end word.
4. Increase awareness to articulatory precision, especially in the initial and final sounds of words, and with unvoiced sounds (*i.e.*, /p / f / th / t / s / sh / k / ch / h /).

Compensate for Lost Facial Cues

1. **Increase eye expression and general gestures**/pantomime as appropriate.
2. **Maintain a direct visual line** with your listeners.
3. **Increase the use of visual aids** for all students - whiteboards, posters, flip charts, notes, etc.
4. Trial clear face masks or face shields.

Simple Exercises to Keep You in Good Vocal Health

1. Hum on /m/ and slide your voice up and down in pitch.
2. Yawn and voice on the exhale slowly sliding down the pitch, maintain a relaxed jaw and larynx/throat.
3. Practice phrases and words with unvoiced sounds (*k / ch / h*) with and without a mask. Attend to word precision, speaking rate, and word boundaries (space between words).

“pack, sack, fake, take, height, fright, pot, stop, cake, hop, shop, chop, sleep” (etc.)

“Pack a snack in the pink backpack.”

“Happy people see the hope if they stop and smell the flowers.”

“Turn to page fifty-three and see the small chart at the top.”

4. Focus on the vibration in the front of the face and the sensations of articulation (oral precision).
5. Practice phrases with sounds that help to improve resonance, balance air pressure, and helps reduce vocal fatigue:

“My mom makes marvelous muffins.”

“My mask makes me sound muffled.”

“Nanette knows nearly nothing north nearby.”

“Bob bakes big breakfast biscuits.”

For more information, visit ChoralNet.org

Leading Voices: Teaching and Singing While Wearing a Mask: Why is it a Challenge and How to Make it Better.