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Diagnosis and Causes of Voice Problems

In a common case of laryngitis, some vocal strain is expected and should be gone in a week or two. However, when your child's voice sounds "froggy," "squeaky," or "hoarse" on a regular basis or for weeks or months at a time, it should be checked out. You may ask a speech pathologist to listen to your child speak if you are not sure there is truly enough hoarseness for you to be concerned. However, no speech pathologist will or should attempt any kind of therapy or intervention until a medical doctor has examined the child and given the green light to do so.

The doctor who examines the vocal cords is called an *otolaryngologist*, also known as an ear, nose, and throat doctor, or an ENT. The doctor needs to see the vocal cords to find out what is causing the hoarseness.

Vocal Polyps

Vocal polyps are fluid-filled sacs that can form on the lining of the vocal cords.

Vocal Nodules

Vocal nodules are small, callous growths that can start on one side of the vocal cords.

Papilloma

Papilloma is a wartlike growth that can occur in the vocal cord area of children. The majority of papilloma cases occur in children under the age of 6.

Children with Voice Problems may:

- Make "squeaking" sounds when speaking
- Run out of air before finishing a normal sentence
- Not speak loudly enough to be heard across a room
- Sound hoarse, harsh, "husky," or "gravelly" for more than ten days at a time or have frequent bouts of "laryngitis" throughout a single year

- Clear their throats frequently
- Sound more “throaty” by the end of the day than in the morning
- Open their mouths and have nothing come out for a second or so
- Sound like two people are talking at the same time, but with different pitches
- Have their voice crack while talking
- Sound strained and “throaty” when laughing or crying

How Do Voice Problems Affect a Child?

The problem is the long-term effect on the strength and quality of the child’s voice, and the possibility of surgery if the hoarseness gets worse. Severe cases may also involve breath support and swallowing issues.

What Can Parents Do to Help a Child with a Voice Problem?

If your child demonstrates any of characteristic behaviors of a voice problem for more than a few weeks, have a doctor check it out. An ear, nose, and throat doctor is preferable. The most important step you can take is to ensure that there is not a serious medical problem causing the voice change. If the doctor feels it is appropriate, a referral to a speech therapist may be made. Once a diagnosis has been made, keep these thoughts in mind:

- Try to help your child change speaking habits by following the speech therapist’s recommendations carefully.
- Keep a quiet home. Make sure your child doesn’t have to be heard over loud music or noisy dishwashers.
- If voice rest is recommended, it is imperative that your child make no sound at all in order for this treatment to have the desired effect. This means no loud laughing or crying, yelling and whispering, although this is often difficult to control in a child.
- Make sure all allergies and respiratory and sinus problems are addressed so that your child does not have to cough, sneeze, or clear his or her throat frequently.
- Keep the radio off in the car so your child doesn’t have to shout over it to be heard.
- Help your child get in the habit of walking over to the person he or she wants to speak to, instead of yelling across the room or down the stairs.
- Monitor the condition of your child’s voice carefully to prevent future relapses.