

VOICE CARE

NUT HEALTH AND SAFETY BRIEFING

This NUT document, produced in co-operation with the Voice Care Network UK, sets out advice to teachers on voice care, including basic advice on spotting problems and simple preventative measures and information on how and when to seek appropriate specialist help.

TEACHERS: AN AT-RISK GROUP

Voice care is an issue of major concern to teachers and trainee teachers. The nature of the job, coupled with a frequent lack of voice training, means that teachers are at considerably greater risk than most other groups of employees of experiencing vocal problems at some point in their careers. S

CHECKLIST FOR USING THE VOICE

Set out below is a brief summary of points to consider about the way teachers use their voices, possible problems which they may be causing for themselves and the way in which their working environment may contribute to these.

More detailed advice on these areas, in particular on speaking techniques, is available from the Voice Care Network (see end of guidance for contact details).

Voice and Speech Patterns

It is important for teachers to:

warm up their voice at the start of the day;

focus their thoughts and make good use of key words;

consider the effect their voice needs to have on the listener and aim for flexibility to reflect the changing moods they wish to convey;

make use of pauses and silences to emphasise their meaning; and

be aware of the symptoms of vocal fatigue and consult their doctor accordingly.

Relaxation

Teachers may find it helpful to:

practise relaxation techniques to ease whole body tension;

before lessons, stretch and relax their facial muscles to release tension from their face and jaw; and

take time to relax and let their voice recover after prolonged speaking, use 'cooling down' exercises and have a warm drink.

Posture

Teachers should be aware of their posture when speaking and consider how their postural alignment and degree of muscular tension affect the tone and resonance of their voice.

Breathing

Shallow 'upper chest breathing' can affect the tone and resonance of the voice. Teachers may find it useful to practice slower 'centred breathing' using the diaphragm, which will help their vocal quality and also release tension and recharge energy.

Pitch

It is a useful exercise for teachers to seek to find their optimum or natural pitch. by making a sound of agreement in their most relaxed state ('hm, hm'). The second sound is most likely to be very close to their optimum pitch. Practicing speaking flexibly on and around this level can be helpful.

Although this may be hard to achieve, teachers should try not to pitch outside their comfortable range or shout to get attention. Instead, they should try using agreed signals and develop 'getting attention' routines using sound, visual and vocal signals.

Your Working Environment (Acoustics, Layout and Air Quality)

Teachers need to be aware of acoustics, space and classroom layout and how these can impact upon their voice and should consider how best to group their class for the task they are undertaking with regard to the acoustics and layout of the room.

Wood, stone, ceramics, pottery, brick, metal and glass all reflect sound, while some large spaces produce echoes. Teachers should aim to speak more slowly with clear pronunciation rather than increasing the volume in such surroundings.

A heavily furnished room with low ceilings and containing many people will absorb sound, meaning that voices have to work much harder, so teachers will need to maintain good posture and articulate words using the front of the mouth.

Dust and fumes or dry atmospheres can affect the voice as well. Poor standards of cleaning, particularly in areas such as art or D&T rooms where particular materials such as clay, solvent-based glues etc are used, can affect air quality. Rooms need to be well ventilated. Humidity can be increased by introducing a few houseplants or by placing bowls of water near radiators.

Self Help for Vocal Fatigue

It is important to drink water frequently. Drinking six or eight glasses a day will help to

FURTHER ADVICE AND HELP

Useful sources include:

Health and Safety Executive (HSE): The HSE's website, www.hse.gov.uk is a useful source for general advice on all areas of occupational health and safety.

Voice Care Network UK: contactable on 01926-864000 or at VCN UK, Office No. 2, 10 Station Road, Kenilworth CV8 1JJ and www.voicecare.org.uk. VCN UK is a national group of voice teachers and speech and language therapists professionally qualified and experienced in classroom and clinic. They provide advice and workshops on voice care, managing acoustics and extending skills in efficient use of voice. VCN UK can be emailed at info@voicecare.org.uk.

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists: contactable on 020 7378 1200 or at www.rcslt.org for support and help with voice problems.