



The Development of the Child Voice

Children learn to sing in the same manner they learn to speak – primarily through imitation.

From birth, auditory stimulation becomes a vital ingredient in this process. As a child responds to sounds in the environment and seeks to express him- or herself vocally, the foundations of singing are laid.

The Five Developmental Stages of Vocal Development

Stage 1 Ages birth to 3 months – First Vocalizations

From birth, the normal healthy child develops a repertoire of vocalizations that help him or her interact with the environment. The child's earliest cries, coos, and sighs form a basis for the development of all singing and spoken language.

Stage 2 Ages 3 – 18 months – Vocal Experimentation and Sound Imitation

During this stage the child enjoys experimenting with his or her own vocalizations. Gurgles, squeals, and babbling are among the child's favorite utterances. Between 6 and 9 months musical babbling may begin, especially when an adult or older child sings to the infant. These musical babbles have definite pitch but usually lack a definite rhythm. Tones are frequently repeated, move in small intervals, or slide downward. Pitches appear to center around middle c but can encompass as many as eight scale tones.

Stage 3 Ages 18 months – 3 years – The Approximation of Singing

In this stage babbling takes on a new dimension as speech development progresses rapidly. "Babbling songs" emerge with more definite rhythm and wider pitch intervals. At about 2 or later the child can begin to learn songs he or she hears. Most often the child will first imitate words, then rhythmic patterns, and finally, pitches. With singing models and some guidance, most children can imitate simple songs by age three.

Stage 4 Ages 3 – 4 years Singing Accuracy – Limited Range

At about age three, children who have had many experiences approximating pitches of songs will begin to sing accurately in a range from about d to g above middle c. This is also a time of spontaneous singing and making up of original songs.

Stage 5 Ages 4 years and up Singing Accuracy – Expanded Range

With many singing experiences and guidance, some children will be able to sing accurately in the range of middle c to an octave above middle c by the age of four or five.

Most children will not complete these stages early. Many will complete them during elementary school. This is due to a variety of factors including:

- 1) environment and exposure to singing models
- 2) repeated opportunities for vocal experimentation and imitation
- 3) physical and emotional maturation
- 4) innate musical capacity
- 5) encouragement and guidance from adults who value singing

Of primary importance in this developmental scheme is the approximation of singing stage usually occurring between the ages of about eighteen months and three years. At this time a repertoire of tonal patterns is being developed and tonal memory is being shaped. Unfortunately, the heavy emphasis on language development at this time may result in inattention to the development of the child's singing voice. For whatever reason, if singing is neglected at this stage, the result may be children and even adults who fail to achieve singing accuracy without remedial help.

Extract from *Teaching the Elementary School Chorus* by Linda Swears.