

3. Hints for leading singing with children (and everyone else) in Special School

Remember – you don't need to be an expert singer or musician to lead successfully. It is desirable to know and like the song you'll be teaching and have some idea of how it is going to work.

Teach the song in small chunks, gradually building the chunks up into longer pieces.

Teach by demonstrating it yourself. The fewer words or instructions the better.

Learn the signs for 'Listen', 'Wait', 'Now', 'My turn' and 'Your turn'.

It is easy for everyone to get confused about when the singers should be *listening* to your demonstration and when they should echo it.

Be consistent about letting them know when to listen to you by saying and signing '**Wait** and **listen** because it's **my turn.**'

And when they should sing by saying and signing '**Now** it's **your turn.**'

Always start with a bit of a '**warm up**'. This more overtly physical activity will get everyone ready to use their singing voices. There are ideas for warm ups on the Sing Up website.

Find a sequence for **starting songs** that is comfortable for you – you might start with something like

1. **Play** the note on a pitch pipe or other instrument.
2. **Sing** and **sign** the note (e.g. "G" or "D" etc.).
3. **Ask** everyone to join you in trying to sing that note.
4. **Count in** – maybe experiment with a few different ways – sometimes a phrase like 'ready to sing' or 'all sing now' can be substituted for the end of the count, to give a really clear start point (e.g. "1, 2, all, sing, now" spoken in rhythm).

Make sure you, and all the other adults, are really **singing with** the learners. The ordinary act of singing brings about a sense of community and wellbeing which everyone present should experience.

Share the leadership. Ask other staff to lead singing sometimes. This gives you an opportunity to observe and decide where changes might need to be made. It also means that singing will still happen even though you might be absent. It is also a really good idea to allow one of the children a chance of leading the singing sometimes. First perhaps ask someone to lead a part of the warm up you would normally take. Be ready to take over whenever the guest leader wants to give up – agree that's what you're going to do beforehand – this will give those who are shy or less confident a low risk, flexible and not too challenging target.

As a first preference, do try teaching the song **unaccompanied**, but if you find a strummed guitar or quiet piano is a help, don't be afraid of using these to make yourself feel more confident. Please be aware that accompaniments should support the voices and not dominate.

Give singers as many pathways as you can – large written lyrics on a white board or flip chart, sung phrases, hand signs or symbols displayed. All singers are differently able and each format will be best for someone in the group. You can try learning a song by moving between these formats and doing away with one or the other.

And when errors occur (as they surely will) make sure there is **no sense of failure and no shaming**. You can be explicit about when adjustments need to be made e.g. "Maybe I didn't get that quite right. Let's all listen again".
All sounds that your singers make can be described as 'interesting'.
And do not expect yourself to be perfect – you have permission to make mistakes sometimes!

Often it is best to **take several sessions** to learn longer or more complex songs, maybe learning just a couple of lines at any one singing time.

Once a song is learnt and is being enjoyed, you may want to introduce some ideas, such as loud, soft, long, short, high, low, fast, slow.
(But beware of inviting singers to sing loudly – they usually end up forcing the voice, or shouting, which can be damaging. Better to talk about allowing the voice to go further, or finding a bit more energy, or sounding fuller. You can demonstrate this.)

Be generous with praise. You can praise good behaviour as well as good singing. When the group has worked well together, invite them to give themselves a round of applause or a lap of honour.

Keep to your pre-planned strategy for **dealing with challenging behaviours**. Let other staff deal with that aspect, while you focus on leading and encouraging the group. When someone is ready to re-join the group, then allow that to happen without giving any special attention to them.

Whenever you hear or make up an appropriate song, record it in some way. Build up your own stack of songs which work well in different situations.

It is a good idea to have a way of **representing each song**, maybe a picture or symbol e.g. Nice Warm Socks = a sock. You can then make a display of the songs that the group knows and you can invite one of the singers (or a guest) to pick one for you all to sing.

Do **invite guests** to hear the singing when you have a few songs ready to perform. This might be another class, the head teacher, the admin. staff, the bus drivers, parents and carers. It makes a huge difference to have a real audience.

Know where to get **help, ideas, resources**. Maybe form a network of singing leaders in your area & meet up occasionally.

Make sure all staff know about the **philosophical underpinning** of why we are singing in schools – community, inclusion, communication benefits, health & well-being, learning, creativity, aesthetic understanding, multicultural benefits, identity, leadership, (add ones I haven't thought of here). And last and best – joy!

Join a local community choir. These are open access choirs who usually learn by ear and adhere to the principles of the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network. See www.naturalvoice.net
Perhaps also check out if your local Secondary School, Parish Church, Chapel, Philharmonic or Operatic Society has a choir with a style that suits you. Don't be put off, try a few before settling on something.

Sing. Aim to sing a bit every day – just for your own enjoyment. This might be in the car, humming in the shower or singing along to the radio. If you sing for 20 minutes each day, I promise you, your singing will get stronger and more confident.