Teaching Kids to Sing by Sheri Gould

Working with kids can be such a joy! Whether you're working with one or with hundreds at a time here are a few tips I hope you'll find helpful.

Fun, Fun, Fun!

The key thing when working with kids is to keep it light and fun. They have plenty of time so stay cool and help to simply instill a love for music in their little hearts. Just like Mary Poppins and her spoonful of sugar, there are ways to make even the bitterest pill easier to swallow. Try your best to make every "exercise" a "game". I'll try to give you some examples as we go.

Good Habits

The thing I care the most about when working with young children and even early adolescents is to keep them stress free in their singing. No strain, no tension is the goal. Habits learned early are hard to break, so help your young people to learn GOOD habits while you have the best shot at it. Never let your kids attempt to sound older by "faking" a vibrato, or belting or using a breathy "head voice" to achieve an upper range. These things can be very damaging to a young voice, as well as habit forming. Help them to accept their voice in the proper form for their age. They don't need to sound like they're 25 if they're only 10!

Pitch and Intonation

Hearing pitch is one thing, being able to duplicate it is another. Transitioning successfully from one pitch to another (intonation) is yet even a different skill to develop. Many children when they come to you will already have a well-developed sense of pitch. Others will not. In this case, the first thing you need to establish is where the problem lies.

It's HIGHLY UNLIKELY that you will ever work with a child (or adult for that matter) that is "tone deaf". This is a very rare affliction. What you are far more likely to run into is a child that has never learned how to *duplicate* the pitches that he does hear. This is largely a result of his inability to formulate a pitch outside of his speaking range. If a child has had little experience with this the behavior will tend to mimic a "tone deaf" person because when you ask him to match pitch with you-he can't. Try a little "game". Seek to establish that your child CAN hear the pitch differences by playing a high and low game. Play or sing a pitch, then follow it with a pitch that is DISTINCTLY higher or lower (you want him/her to be successful). I personally have yet to have any child NOT get this right on the first try.

Next, try to get your child to match pitch. Once you've established what high and low is, it will be easier for you to get the child to assess for himself whether or not he's on pitch. For example, you sing a nice "ahhhh" on an "A" above middle "C". You ask the child to duplicate it. He comes in with a resounding "uhhhh" on a "B" below middle "C". At that point you ask him, "Are you singing the same note that I am?" More than likely (believe it or not) the child will know whether or not they are. You see, once again let me reiterate: the child most likely CAN hear it, he simply hasn't learned how to *duplicate* it yet. Once you've established that the child has sung the wrong note, ask him whether the note he sang was higher or lower than the note YOU sang (he will most likely get this right as well).

By this exercise you will have established his/her sense of pitch. You will know how well developed the child's EAR is.

Moving Up and Down

The largest hurdle to overcome with a child that has difficulty matching pitch with you is to get the child out of the comfort of his own speaking range. Having established the difference between high and low pitches, you can move forward in trying to get him/her more comfortable with the higher parts of their range. Typically, singing HIGHER is the more difficult skill to master.

So try the "Airplane Game". Pretending to be an airplane taking off, squat down and have the child do so as well. Start off with a really low pitch, the lowest pitch you can muster. As you physically begin to rise up, bring your arms alongside up as well until you are standing and looking like you're about to take off! At the same time, raise your pitch up as well. Extend your body all the way straight and start to raise your arms over your head and stand on your tip-toes. At this point your pitch should be at the top of your range. Then go back down, gradually lowering your arms to your sides (and your pitch as well) until your body is back in the same position that you started from. The child should then mimic you. Do this until he "gets it" making sure he's not substituting volume for pitch! That is a very common mistake for kids when they're first starting out.

Depending on the age of the kids you work with, this game can be varied. It works well with groups of kids or individual kids as well.

Be Sensitive!

When working with groups of kids it's very important to be aware of how easily embarrassed a child can get by singing a wrong note. Imagine how YOU would feel singing a wrong note in front a group of your peers. Kids will tend to react with laughter when it becomes obvious that someone is singing out of tune. So please be careful. To the extent that it's possible try to NOT specifically point out WHO may be singing incorrectly, but rather speak more generically to the group and practice the games with EVERYONE at the same time. When it DOES become obvious (as it frequently does) WHO the out of tune singer is, breeze through dealing with it very nonchalantly. Make sure to find something GREAT about that kid before your rehearsal is over to counter any negative thing that may have occurred in the little one's heart.