Working With Boys & Their Changing Voices

Teachers and Kids Need to Know:

- Male voice change occurs in approximately five stages; each stage is characterized by a period of growth followed by a period of stabilization.
- Boys’ voices don’t change “overnight,” but we do notice the lower pitches first, so it appears that the change occurs very quickly. These lower pitches are just part of the overall change process.
- In boys, puberty begins as early as age 10 and as late as age 14; the onset of puberty is trending younger (in girls, it’s trending younger at a much faster rate).
- All normally healthy boys pass through the five stages in a sequence that is 100% predictable (according to research).
- The most reliable indicator of a stage of voice change is the total range of the singing voice (excluding falsetto).
- There is some anecdotal evidence that voices that change rapidly are likely to become basses while those that change slowly or begin late will become tenors.
- Voice training cannot alter the stage of change (you can’t change physiology). But, voice training does assist boys in singing throughout the change process.
- Some teachers report that their boys sing an octave lower then they’re supposed to, when the reality is that the boy is singing correctly.
  - Generally it’s either an auditory issue of the teacher (not the student) who hears the pitch an octave lower than it really sounds, or...
  - the student sings at the bottom of his range because the teacher sings at the bottom of his/her range (student imitates the production rather than the pitch).
- Excessive vocal “cracking” can be expected in boys who...
  - have had minimal singing experience,
  - continue to use the same singing techniques as before puberty, and
  - continue singing mostly in head voice/falsetto after the voice is capable of lower pitches.
- When boys seem to have “blank” pitches where they cannot phonate:
  - if they have falsetto, vocalize downward before upward;
  - if they do not yet have falsetto, do not force the issue. Experiment with pitch exploration exercises (babbling, cooing, sighing on [U]) at a very low volume level; asking for a “breathy” sound and/or physical movement may also help.
- All male voices go through all stages, but some “rebound” to a higher pitch level after the final stage. (ask an adult tenor if he ever had “bass” notes...he did!)

Stages of the Boys’ Changing Voice (research of John Cooksey)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Quarter notes indicate average tessituras.</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage I</th>
<th>Stage II</th>
<th>Stage III</th>
<th>Stage IV</th>
<th>Stage V</th>
<th>Stage VI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unchanged</td>
<td>Midvoice</td>
<td>Midvoice II</td>
<td>Midvoice IIA</td>
<td>New Baritone</td>
<td>Developing Baritone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: falsetto emerges during Midvoice IIA, indicating the peak of the change process.
Related Research About the Brains of Adolescent Boys:

- email the presenter if you wish to obtain the citations for this research

- Changes in adolescent brains begin before the hormonal changes associated with puberty.¹
  - Cognitive development doesn’t necessarily occur in tandem with pubertal development. A 13-year-old boy who looks like a mature young man may be at the same cognitive level as another 13-year-old boy who looks quite immature.
  - **Cognitive development** during adolescence **parallels age and experience** rather than the timing of puberty.
  - **Affective development** during adolescence, including motivation and emotional response, **parallels puberty** rather than age or experience.
  - The area of the brain responsible for coordinating affect (emotion) and cognition is among the last areas to mature.
- During childhood, emotional responses are centered in anatomical structures of the brain closely related to physical activity; during adolescence, there is a gradual shift in the control of emotions to areas of the brain more closely related to language use and higher-order thinking.² This shift occurs earlier and more rapidly in girls than in boys.³ Thus, adolescent girls tend to express their emotions with words, and adolescent boys with physical action.⁴
- A moderate amount of stress and challenge enhances learning in adolescent males, whereas it limits learning in adolescent females.⁵
- Recent meta-analytic estimates suggest that self-esteem is as much of a problem for adolescent boys as it is for adolescent girls.⁶
- A developmental "window" exists until the onset of puberty (around age 9) during which the brain accumulates knowledge with extraordinary ease. At the earliest onset of puberty, this ability to accumulate knowledge lessens, and the focus of the brain shifts to strengthening preexisting knowledge and deleting knowledge that is no longer deemed necessary—the "use it or lose it" principle. Adolescents who stop participating in making music lose many of the musical abilities they gained in childhood and become adults who report they "can't sing" or "can't read music."⁷
- The growth of brain cells involved in higher-order thinking normally peaks in males at age 12,⁸ exactly the age that boys experience the climax of the voice-change process.⁹

When Talking to Adolescent Boys:

- Emphasize that singing is not a gift, but a skill that can be developed.
- You are preparing for a lifetime of music making that may take many forms.
- Visualize the stages of change by having students track their progress on charts.
- Introduce the topic of voice change using familiar, non-threatening terms; work from simple to complex when discussing physiology.
- Emphasize that the voice change results from growth of physique and strengthening of muscles.
- Show the larynx “in action” with anatomical models & videos (www.evolutionnyc.com)
- Encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills; let boys become advocates for their own vocal development by encouraging them to tell you what’s happening.
- Make sure the foundation exists for musical success; teach musical skills rather than repertoire.
- Provide quality vocal models for the changing voices.
- Promote the “possible self” of these boys as singers. Remember – we’re building toward the concert on May 18, 2032 – **not** the concert on May 18, 2012!
  - **DVD:** “Success for Adolescent Singers” (www.choralexcellence.com)
- Where to Start?
  - Count backward 20-1 (Fundamental speaking pitch usually m3 above lowest singing pitch)
  - Unaccompanied familiar song **without** predetermined pitch level
- Voice parts are not SAG (Sop, Alto, Guys); music must fit voices; don’t force voices to fit music.
- Composite unison range of a mixed adolescent choir is about a M6 (generally A-F#).
- Warm-ups need to involve improvisation where every boy sings in his optimal range.