



Getting Started in Primary Special Needs Settings

Good singing requires the same things from everyone regardless of their situation. Balanced posture, relaxed breathing, refined vowel sounds and clear diction all have to be striven for. The following will help you to achieve these with a group of children with SEND without anyone becoming frustrated or stressed.

Preparation

You won't need to collect masses of material: "Singing Sherlock" Books 1 and 2 are an excellent place to start. "Jelly Fish Jiggle" and "Tropical Island" audio files and lead sheets are offered courtesy of **Can Do Music**. If you would like more information or to discuss any of the points below please contact Susan Mann at Music Unlimited 0161 702 9290 or musicunlimited@me.com

As with any activity, the children will need far more repetition than their mainstream peers and will be quite happy doing the same warm-ups, exercises and songs for weeks on end. Far from becoming bored, they will start to grow in confidence because they know exactly what is required of them. They will feel empowered because they "know" something well. If you have one exercise each for vowels and for diction and two songs, that will be all you will need for at least the first six weeks.

As you know children with SEND will copy what they see and hear, not what is described to them. Your main role must be to lead with your voice. You will also want to accompany the children but whether you play live or use backing tracks, make sure that you will never be too busy to be looking at, and singing to, the children from start to finish. It may be many months before you can stand back and let the group sing alone.

If you do intend to use backing tracks as accompaniment, the amplification you use is critical. You have to use the best you have. Once the children really start to sing they will swamp a small system. In any case, have your speakers pointing at the group. If you are using a Coomber type machine, put it in front of you so it sounds as if the music is coming from you.



Seating

We always use the team photo model of tallest central etc. If you have a big group add more rows. Many young children will not cope well with being sat in tight rows at first but that is the way it sounds best. Your choir is unlikely to be compulsory so if a child has had enough or cannot settle, gently coax them out and let them try again next week.

Balanced posture

It probably won't be practical for all the choir to stand all the time so when sitting, insist on both feet on the floor, no crossed legs, and hips and shoulders vertically aligned. Repeat this like a mantra. If choir members are using wheelchairs or special supports, ask for physio. help and advice as to how best to optimise positioning for singing.

Relaxed Breathing

In our experience, the more you talk about it the less relaxed it becomes. If the posture is right and the children are singing plenty of long notes, best not to mention it.

Vowels

This is where the individuals will find their voice and the choir will build its sound. There will always be limits on what children with SEND can achieve with regard to diction and register, but there is no reason at all why vowel sounds cannot be developed and improved throughout life.

Spend lots of time on the five vowel sounds. Try to model the vowels as pure as you can. The sound is formed in the throat and has nothing to do with mouth shape. (This is the basis of ventriloquism so you can have some fun with that). As English speakers we often use diphthongs when we speak vowel sounds "ay ee eyeh ohw ooweh". Try to sound Italian; "ah-a-i-o-oo". Italian impersonations can be good fun and a win-win as they promote good vowels and relax everyone.

The sounds need to be long in duration. Using seconds as a pulse hold notes for 2x2x4 and sing "ah-o-ah". Use a keyboard or glockenspiel and start on C then work your way up the white notes step by step repeating the same 2x2x4 duration as far as you can towards the next C. The only variation you will need for weeks will be different vowel combinations. First attempts will probably be very uncontrolled, but stick with it. This is the way to improve sound quality.

Clear Diction

Any of the warm-ups from Singing Sherlock will do. Repetition is vital here. Diction and vowel exercises will be the first things the children learn by heart. It is a great time in the session to tell them how good they are and how much they are improving week on week. Have a go at making up your own words to familiar exercises. This is a great way of playing to strengths and addressing weaknesses in pronunciation as only you will know what these are.

Songs

Look for songs in verse/chorus form that use as much repetition as possible. "Wimmoweh" is a good example of how to use repetition without becoming monotonous. The two included songs are also full of repetition and proven winners at primary level and can be heard at www.candomusic.co.uk Don't be afraid to modify phrases a little if it makes it easier to sing. Have a go at writing your own song. Here's how:

- Make lists of things the children like to; eat, play, watch, wear, learn etc. Something will jump out of the lists, a funny phrase or something poetic.
- Learn two chords on the keyboard or glockenspiel. (A chord is a set of notes played simultaneously or one after the other.) Learn D minor, comprised of the notes D F and A. Learn C major C E G.
- Chant your phrase and play D minor followed by C major round and round. It will turn into a song if the chords are strong enough. Many famous songs start with exactly this chord sequence.