

Probing Question: Can anyone be taught how to sing?

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Think back to the last birthday party you attended. When the candles were lit, did you join everyone else in belting out the "Happy Birthday" song -- or were you too self-conscious to do more than mouth the words? Our everyday lives are full of situations where we are expected to sing: parties, worship services, and even sporting events, where the national anthem is often played. (The Star Spangled Banner is notoriously difficult to sing, with a range of one and a half octaves.)

Is a decent singing voice a toss of the genetic dice or can anyone learn to sing?

"Everyone who can speak can learn to use a singing voice," said Joanne Rutkowski, professor of music education. "The quality of the voice is dependent on many factors; however, barring a physical vocal disability, everyone can learn to sing well enough to sing basic songs."

While some factors are genetic, Rutkowski says growing up in a musical environment strongly influences whether someone sings well and confidently. "We have evidence," she noted, "that the primary factors are growing up in an environment where parents, other adults, [siblings](#), and other children are singing and interacting with a child musically."

So how does a self-proclaimed "bad singer" learn to sing? "Many people who have difficulty singing are trying to sing with their talking [voices](#) -- the voice they are used to using," said Rutkowski. "We typically speak in a lower and limited range, and the singing voice is higher than our speaking voices. So it's a matter of learning to relax the vocal mechanism and use supported breath to produce the sound, rather than trying to make the voice 'do something.' That only causes tension and keeps the voice in a low register."

So, once you've learned to use your singing voice, does that mean you're ready to audition for "American Idol?" Not necessarily, added Rutkowski. "Everyone who can speak can learn to use a singing voice, but not everyone will have a fabulous-sounding voice. Once the vocal instrument is working, the ability to sing with good intonation is dependent on musical aptitude and musical achievement."

Like many other skills, it is easier to teach a child to sing than an adult, Rutkowski noted. "The longer a person tries to sing with a speaking voice, the harder it becomes to break that habit. So the earlier, the better. Teaching children to use their singing voices in an appropriate healthy, and musical way is a primary goal of elementary general music."

If you are well past elementary school, but tired of lip-syncing "Happy Birthday," consider joining a nonauditioned community choir or a choir at a place of worship, if you attend one, advised Rutkowski. "These groups typically have singers with a variety of backgrounds and abilities, and the directors often know how to work with 'emerging' singers."

No matter your age, voice lessons are also an option. Just be sure to clearly communicate your needs and goals to the instructor, Rutkowski said. "Are you a beginner who needs to learn how to use your singing voice? Or can you already sing, but are interested in learning how to make your voice sound better? If you communicate your needs before beginning lessons, the instructor should be able to tell you if she or he is the person to help you."

Finally, part of the process is simply learning to become comfortable with the unique voice you have, Rutkowski added. When the message of the song is heartfelt, a spirited sing-along is always music to the ears!

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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