

## TOPIC: VOICE DISORDERS

**DEFINITION:** Voice disorders are generally undesirable variations in an individual's volume, pitch, resonance, or quality of their voice which is based on one's age, gender, or other factors. Disorders of the voice may be acute or chronic, and may have abrupt onset or develop slowly over time. The disorders may be caused by abnormal physiology, patterned behavior, neurological issues, or vocal abuse. Voice disorders can affect any individual across the lifespan.

### CHARACTERISTICS:

- Disorders of Volume--some individuals may struggle to produce, use, or maintain appropriate voice volume for the situation or setting.
- Disorders of Pitch--some individuals may have a vocal pitch that sounds "too high" or "too low" for their gender; or, individuals may speak in a voice that is "too flat" or monotone, or perhaps too melodic (i.e. "sing-songy").
- Disorders of Resonance--most speech sounds resonate in the mouth; some individuals may speak with nasal resonance due to physiological differences, causing them to sound either hypernasal (i.e. too much air flows through, and even out of, the nose when speaking; this often occurs with individuals having a cleft palate) or hyponasal (i.e. too little air flows through the nose when speaking, so the person sounds "stuffy", as with a cold; this often occurs for individuals having enlarged adenoids or other obstruction within the nasopharynx--the upper throat--or nasal sinuses).
- Disorders of Vocal Quality--this includes breathy voice quality, hoarse or harsh voice quality, or difficulty sustaining voice production, or even inability to produce voicing at all. These voice disorders often result from organic issues secondary to vocal abuse, or from neurological issues. For example, an individual may develop vocal polyps or nodules on their vocal cord muscles, which are much like blisters and/or calluses. Polyps and nodules prevent the vocal cord muscles from moving and vibrating appropriately, which may lead to difficulty sustaining voicing (i.e. voice "cracks" or "breaks"); they may prevent vocal cord muscles from closing completely, resulting in a breathy vocal quality.

### RECOMMENDATION FOR SERVICES:

- Schedule a screening with a speech-language pathologist, or discuss concerns with a primary care physician, so that proper referral can be made.
- The underlying cause of the voice disorder must be assessed and diagnosed by a physician, often an otolaryngologist, who will also provide medical or surgical treatments, if necessary, prior to or in conjunction with voice therapy from an experienced speech-language pathologist with expertise in the treatment of voice disorders.

### WHAT TO DO AT HOME:

- Try to follow a good "vocal hygiene" protocol. This includes habits such as drinking adequate amounts of water daily, avoiding irritants (i.e. chemical vapors, smoke, etc.), speaking with a moderate voice volume (i.e. avoid yelling and/or whispering, often), and limiting throat-clearing.