

Is singing a once-a-year event in your family, confined to cathartic rendition of carols at a Christmas church service or round the tree? And if you did belt out favorite carols last week, did you find it surprisingly enjoyable? And you might have noticed that even the usually too-cool-for-Yule teenagers felt better for exercising their lungs and vocal chords.

The real benefits of singing reach into many areas of teenagers' lives, says Jo Thompson, a London singing teacher and author of *Find Your Voice*. "It increases the heart rate, reduces tension and raises energy levels. And it helps kids to raise their self-esteem. A lot of young people are very self-conscious and singing helps them express themselves. And if they learn to control their breathing they can use that to help in situations where they feel anxious.

"Singing gives a great sense of accomplishment, especially for academic low achievers. I worked with one girl who was excluded from her comprehensive school, and singing really made her feel better about herself, that she could achieve something."

So wouldn't it be marvelous if children and teenagers could have more singing in their everyday lives? But what opportunities do young people have for singing? Singing is a statutory requirement of the music national curriculum from the age of five, but it ends at 14. And as there are no set time allocations for singing, it can be pushed to the margins.

Thompson reckons a lot depends on the budgets schools have. The lucky ones, such as state primaries in the wealthy London borough of Kensington and Chelsea, can employ specialist teachers but others, such as her sons' primary in cash-strapped Ealing, have to make do with a weekly sing-song with the deputy head.

And singing teachers need imagination if they're not going to turn their young charges off for life: "Kids I know are being told they can't sing in tune so they can't be in the choir - now they'll never open their mouths again. Yet anybody can sing - to different degrees. Some are born with a great natural instrument, but you can teach anyone and make them better."

MJ Paranzino, an American singer based in Brighton, is proof of this. She runs regular day-long vocal workshops, where clients - including professional singers, actors wanting to improve their speaking voices, adults who just want to get in touch with their inner diva and pop and rock-mad youngsters - spend a day together seeing just how much fun they can have.

The effect on the boys - aged 12 to 15 - at a class I attended was a revelation. You wouldn't have thought that a grey-haired middle-aged woman who, before we'd been there long, had already told them to sit up straight and take their hands out of their pockets - and then got them to stand up alone in front of the others



The benefits for kids in learning to sing aren't trumpeted enough, says Karen Robinson, especially for those with low self-esteem

and sing *Tonight* from *West Side Story* - would be a figure the lads would warm to, but after a few Kevin-esque snorts and nudges they gave her their total absorbed attention.

Without baffling us with musical technicalities, she brought out the best in everyone, improving their tone and, more importantly, their confidence. "Mike is a real singer," she remarked at one point. "He just doesn't know it yet." But he had a good idea by the end of the day.

Paranzino demands energy and commitment. "Oh, you are so lackluster," she chided them. "Don't hold back, go over the top - then you can put it right. If you don't go over the top, you'll never discover what you can do."

The boys weren't allowed to give less than their best. "Oh, I'm bored!" she exclaimed at one point. "Have some magic about you, don't be boring." After that, they weren't.

A day with Paranzino is a mixture of breathing, vocal exercises,

choral improvisations and work on a selection of songs, from a "girly" Louis Prima number to Nina Simone's *Feeling Good*.

Maria Boyle, who sings with *Drivin' Miss Daisy*, a Sussex based semi-professional jazz band, got some useful tips about how to tell the boys in the band what key she wanted to sing in - as opposed to what key they wanted to play in - while the lads with rock-band aspirations learnt how to move their bodies, and especially what to do with their hands while singing, and were advised to "embrace the rhythm" when writing songs.

"Harry, baby, I love you, you're so groovy," she enthused at one point. "She really makes you feel like you can sing," Harry told me afterwards.

There was a lovely moment in the afternoon when the boys were doing the "doo-wah, doo-wah" backing vocals as each of us girls took turns to belt out a couple of verses from Bonnie Raitt's *Give It Up or Let Me Go*. When eight-year-old Nancy took her turn, in her sweet but tiny voice, they all, quite spontaneously, lowered their "doo-wahs" almost to a whisper so she could still be heard. They were so unselfconsciously "into the music" it happened quite naturally.

Thompson says that working on the singing voice also helps the speaking voice: "With singing, you feel good in the moment, but it's also a confidence-builder." Yet another reason why children

should be given every encouragement to carry on singing at every opportunity.

"But if they're not singing what they want to sing, it doesn't work, they're not excited by it. My experience in schools is that they're quite classical, and none of the kids I come across want to do classical music."

Parents should encourage their children to sing around the house, she says: "Don't tell them not to sing along to their CDs."

Paranzino also supports more formal group activities. "Encourage them to join a group or a choir," she says.

And if you or your children want to find a singing teacher outside school, both Paranzino and Thompson agree on the following points.

Make sure the teacher has a good understanding of technique, and how the voice works.

The teachers must know what they are doing and not damage young voices.

Find a teacher who will let your children sing the kind of music they like, even allowing them to bring along their favorite CDs.

The best singing teachers are, or have been, performers.

A relentlessly positive attitude is essential, especially for children. Find a teacher through your child's school, local music shops and libraries.

And, most important, relax and enjoy yourself. Who knows, by this time next year, the family choir could be in even better voice.