

Singing in schools is safe

For school leaders

There continues to be widespread confusion about whether it's possible to sing in schools under the Department for Education's guidance. Just to be clear: it is. Schools opened in September 2020 with a limit of 15 children singing but this limit was quietly dropped with the publication of the PERFORM study in October 2020, in favour of advice on ventilation.

At no point did the guidance expressly say that the limit on numbers was no longer in place but the current (6th April 2021) version of the Operational guidance for schools says:

Singing, wind and brass instrument playing can be undertaken in line with this and other guidance

The National Curriculum for Music:

aims to ensure that all pupils...learn to sing and to use their voices

In Key Stage 1:

Pupils should be taught to: use their voices expressively and creatively by singing songs and speaking chants and rhymes

In Key Stage 2:

Pupils should be taught to sing...musically with increasing confidence and control.

The Model Music Curriculum:

*takes as its starting point the ambition that every young person should be able to experience music and to make progress. **This includes singing...***

Some schools may have spaces that are not suitable for singing but it is unlikely that any school has no rooms at all where singing can take place perfectly safely. Class teachers and Music Education Hub staff have been leading singing in schools since September 2020 and to date, Music Mark is not aware of a single Covid-19 infection (let alone an outbreak) that has been linked to singing.

There is an outline risk assessment template at the end of this paper.

Research

Studies since at least the 1930s have shown that we release water droplets when we breath, cough and sneeze and whenever we vocalise. These studies have consistently shown that aerosol production increases in proportion with volume. The PERFORM study confirmed this and also showed that aerosol production is broadly similar whether speaking, singing or simply shouting. In other words, how loudly someone vocalises is more significant to aerosol production than how s/he vocalises.

All the research to date (including the Colorado research) has measured adult singers, either professionals or HE-level students. The advice in the DCMS Performing Arts Guidance and the Suggested Principles for Safer Singing exclusively consider adult singing. Music Mark's advice is aimed specifically at school-based singing and considers that:

- Children have smaller lungs and less developed musculature than adults, so move less air;
- Children are not physically capable of singing for as long at a time;
- When children are not singing, they are still in their class or bubble and remain exposed to each other's aerosol, whereas adults will generally disperse.

All these points remain true to a greater or lesser degree throughout statutory education and into the sixth form. Secondary teachers will however need to take account of the physical development of their pupils.

In the classroom

At the risk of being tedious, *there is no restriction on singing in class bubbles.*

In terms of Covid-19:



The main risk to children therefore derives from being in their bubble for 25 hours or more per week. The greater mixing in secondary year group bubbles probably increases the risk further, compared to being with the same small group for a longer.

Given that a rise in the volume of speech is known to increase aerosol production, it is clear that any activity where children work together raises the risk. This would include:

- small group science experiments;
- practising dialogues in language classes;
- any structured or unstructured play (Reception, KS1).

Managing singing for aerosol production

Since the first version of *Music Unlocked*, we have recommended the same control measures for singing. None of the research or guidance published since, nor the Suggested Principles for Safer Singing, have prompted a change in our recommendations. We are confident that a well-managed singing lesson which follows these recommendations will create no more risk (and quite probably less) than many other subjects.

1. **Schedule singing sessions before a break** if possible, so the empty room can be ventilated immediately afterwards.
2. **Limit singing sessions to no more than 40 minutes.** Children will only actively be singing for a fraction of this, even though the time is being used in a focussed, valuable and musical way.
3. **Ventilate the room** as best you can during the session. If there are higher windows, opening these provide clean air without making the room uncomfortably cold.
4. **Face all children in the same direction** so that nobody is singing directly at another person's face. It may help to offset rows, placing singers in a checkerboard pattern.
5. **Keep the dynamic (volume) down**, generally to no more than *mezzo piano* (moderately soft). Focus on making a beautiful sound, not a loud one.
6. **Do not insist on musical-theatre levels of diction.** Emphasising consonants creates additional water droplets ranging from visible to aerosol size (below 5 μ) and increases risk of transmission.
7. **Project words and music** onto a whiteboard if possible. If you must distribute paper copies, have children name theirs and retain it for future sessions. All state schools in England can make copies of most music under the Schools' Printed Music Licence, which the DfE funds.
8. **Ventilate the empty room after the session** for a good fifteen minutes. This is especially important if you sing in a shared space (like a school hall) and another group will use it after you.

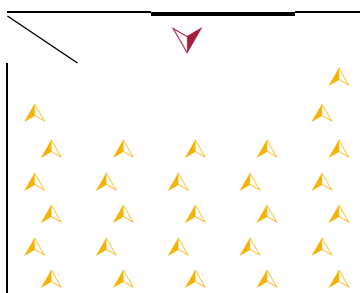
Ventilation

New-build schools will usually have a mechanical ventilation system but beware: if it merely recirculates unfiltered air, switch it off. In the vast majority of schools, ventilation means opening doors and windows. See [Ventilation of teaching spaces](#) on the Music Mark website.

Distancing

Distancing while singing has two benefits: firstly it enables air to mix, so diluting any contaminated aerosol; and secondly it allows larger water droplets to fall to the ground rather than landing on someone else. If distancing is not possible (and moving around the school to a larger, shared space like the hall might introduce additional hazards), just do the best you can.

Remember that the adult(s) in the room are more susceptible to Covid-19 and are at greater risk if they do contract it, so adults should definitely maintain at least 2m distancing, preferably more. This may mean leaving more space immediately in front of the adult leading the singing for example:



Singing incidentally to other activities

If you are only singing one song in a lesson, for example a times table song, just do it. Keep the volume low and don't spit out the words. As noted above, if there is any amount of class discussion during the lesson, that will probably create more aerosol than one short song, sung quietly.

Singing the register is fine but we would recommend against singing while moving around (e.g. tidying up songs), as children can pass closer to each other or sing into each other's faces.

Singing in larger groups

The guidance says that *singing, wind and brass playing should not take place in larger groups such as choirs and ensembles, or assemblies unless significant space, natural airflow and strict social distancing and mitigation can be maintained*. Music Mark has always understood this to mean groups larger than a class bubble. You may be able to have singing assemblies in a large school hall with plenty of ventilation but this is likely to be limited to year groups. Whole-school singing is still some way off.

Singing in after-school clubs

Schools are encouraged to offer after-school clubs and wraparound care again and all pupils are now able to attend. External providers (e.g. Music Education Hub partners) may be commissioned to provide these.

If singing is part of this provision, you should consider ventilation and the measures suggested for singing in the classroom. In addition, if there are children from multiple class bubbles (which is almost certain), you should manage them in "small, consistent groups" of no more than 15. More than one group of 15 may take part in the same activity but groups must not be permitted to mingle.

External lettings

Under the Schools' Operational Guidance, schools now can let spaces to external groups. The hirer will be responsible for adhering to the guidance for their sector, although the school may wish to undertake due diligence to ensure that their facilities are to be used safely. For adult groups, the best guide is <https://www.makingmusic.org.uk/resource/can-group-get-back-in-person>, which interprets and links to the DCMS guidance. Lettings for children's activities come under the DfE's Out of School Settings guidance and the 'rule of 15' applies.

Links to further information:

[Music Unlocked](#) page on the Music Mark website

The DfE's main [schools' operational guidance document](#)

The DfE's guidance for [Out-of-School Settings](#) (OOSS)

[Aerosol Information](#) by Prof Martin Ashley on the ABCD website

[Aerosol infographic](#) by Prof Alison McMillan on the Making Music website

The [PERFORM study](#) (unfairly known as the Costello research)

The internationally funded [Colorado study](#) led by Prof Shelly Miller at Colorado-Boulder

A paper on [children and singing](#) by Prof Martin Ashley, commissioned by Music Mark and Sing Up

Covid-19 Supplementary Risk Assessment

Purpose

This document is intended for anyone who has responsibility for music-making in education settings. It provides suggested control measures and prompts to think about specific local circumstances. Please note that it is not intended to cover all risks associated with any activity: it looks only at additional measures to minimise transmission Covid-19. Existing risk assessments still apply.

This is not a complete document: users must adapt the content to fit local circumstances and to comply with individual organisations' safety management systems. Legal responsibility for any activity rests with the person or organisation in charge.

Assessing the risks

Remember that assessing risk is about understanding hazards and can never expect to eliminate all possibility of harm.

The standard is to identify **reasonably foreseeable** risks. We know that the extreme outcome of this infection is death or long-term health detriment but both are unusual outcomes in children and younger adults. The reasonably foreseeable risk here is the spread of Covid-19 virus.

If the activity happens in a health setting or participants are known to have underlying health (particularly respiratory) issues, you will need to account for this at an activity or individual level.

Control measures should be **reasonable** and **proportionate**. Remember that the person most at risk may be the adult leading the activity: this is not just about the children. As death rates increase with age, it may be reasonable and proportionate to have more or fewer controls depending on the ages of participants and definitely depending on their general health.

Control measures

Many control measures cost little, if anything, to put in place, so consider behavioural or procedural measures (a Safe System of Work) before specifying equipment. Do bear in mind the cost of staff time however and the probability that people are likely to overlook control measures which are excessively onerous or laborious.

Enable and encourage

Risk assessment is a positive process which enables activity. Music Mark and its members want children to be able to make music. The safest classroom music-making is no music-making but that is deeply undesirable and it still does not mean nobody will catch the virus. Music Mark hopes this document will help music educators to make the case for playing musical instruments and singing in education, whatever the setting's risk appetite and local circumstances.

Covid-19 Supplementary Risk Assessment

Class Music – Singing in Bubbles

Owner:			
Consultees:			
Version:			
Date of assessment:		Review date (max 1 yr):	

Description of activity

Singing as part of class activity and music teaching. If specific to a group, school or situation, provide details such as where it takes place (site, space, room) numbers involved, equipment and who leads the activity.

References to related risk assessments

If there is a pre-existing risk assessment for this activity, refer to it here.

Existing control measures

These are the things you already do, or are inherent in the activity, that reduce the risks.

	Hazard	Who is at risk?	Control measure(s)	Who is responsible?
1	Airborne transmission	Everyone	Pupils take up the maximum space possible.	
2	Airborne transmission	Teacher	Teacher to be at least 2m (further if possible) from the nearest pupil.	
3	Airborne transmission	Everyone	Singing limited to x minutes or x songs. Note: discouraging loud singing in favour of quality of sound in quiet singing generates fewer aerosols. Note: extremes of diction (particularly plosives) generate more aerosols, so maybe try singing only on vowels sometimes.	
4	Airborne transmission	Everyone	Ventilation is key. Could you sing with the windows open, even if you have to wear coats? Or better yet, sing outdoors?	
5	Surface transmission via printed music	Pupils	Songs mainly taught by ear. If required, words are projected. Can pupils retain their own copy of any music or could music go into individual, named, plastic pouches?	
6	Surface transmission via equipment used for playing backing tracks or accompanying	Teacher	Cleaning of PC or CD player for backing track or piano/keyboard? Refer to Music Mark's guidance for advice on cleaning equipment.	
7	Add additional controls if necessary in your situation			

Initial risk rating

How likely is the activity to result in actual harm (1-5)?	
How severe would the consequences be (1-5)?	
Risk rating (likelihood x severity)	

Likelihood	less	5					
		4					
		3					
		2					
		1					
			1	2	3	4	5
			better worse				
Severity							

Additional control measures


























These are new measures identify to reduce the risk rating. It is usually easier (and it is perfectly acceptable) to reduce the likelihood of harm rather than the severity.

It is not necessary to implement additional control measures for every hazard identified. Prioritise the hazards you have identified and ensure that control measures are reasonable and proportionate.

	Hazard	Who is at risk?	Control measure(s)	Who is responsible?
1	Airborne transmission	Teacher	Mask and/or screen advisable?	
2	Airborne transmission (vulnerable teacher)	Teacher	State any extra measures if the teacher is more vulnerable (older, underlying health issues).	
3	Airborne transmission (vulnerable pupils)	Pupil or pupils	State any additional measures required for children with health issues, e.g. asthma	
4	Add additional controls if necessary in your situation			

Residual Risk rating

How likely is the activity to result in actual harm (1-5)?	
How severe would the consequences be (1-5)?	
Risk rating (likelihood x severity)	

Likelihood	more	5					
		4					
		3					
		2					
	less	1					
			1	2	3	4	5
				better		worse	
			Severity				

Risk rating:	1-6	Green	Monitor to ensure control measures are implemented consistently and that the rating remains valid.
	8-12	Amber	Try to identify additional controls to reduce the risk. Ensure that control measures are implemented consistently and look to improve by the next review.
	15-25	Red	Cease this activity until additional controls can be put in place to manage the risk.

Date communicated to staff/volunteers: _____

Signed: _____ **Date:** _____

Name: _____ **Position:** _____

Remember:

- This is a legal document: you must do (or ensure that people working for you do) what you say in it.
- Risk assessments must be reviewed at least annually or when there is an incident, i.e. in this case, if someone falls ill after taking part in the activity.
- For the purposes of Health & Safety, if you have not recorded it, you have not done it.