

Let's kick shame to the curb:

Encouraging adults to honor their childhood performances

By Dr. Heather Nelson

I love working with adult singers. They are my favorite demographic. There are some challenges that come up, though, so let's talk about them.

Now, if your favorite clients are kids, I would invite you to keep reading a little longer, because the kids you are teaching now are eventually going to be adults, and I think this could be helpful for framing your teaching now.

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Adults rarely come in as clean slates when it comes to singing. There are habits, compensations, well-developed skills, and baggage to sift through. I have found most often that working with adults is kind of like peeling an onion. Every layer has the potential to be good or rotten. It's part of my job to help my client to examine each layer, keep the good stuff, and replace the things that are no longer serving them. Sometimes that can be as simple as a vocal habit developed over time that would be better replaced with a more reliable and efficient technique. That's often pretty straightforward, and most of the time can be a great source of some quick wins. Quick wins can help develop trust for when the harder stuff comes up later.

That harder stuff is often from the stories the singers tell themselves about their singing, and about who they see themselves to be. In a recent [blog post](#) published on my website, I rant a little about a segment I saw on a talk show that really got my mind churning about how adults can downplay or even ridicule what they did as kids. The host commented on how this particular celebrity got his start as a child star, beginning with some appearances on TV competition shows where he had performed as a dancer. I'm being intentionally vague because my intention is not to call out these particular people, but rather the behavior and the prevailing thought that drove that conversation. The thing that really, really got me thinking was how the host and the celebrity characterized his childhood dancing. The celebrity expressed embarrassment about it, the host was poking fun, and the audience laughed along. I got very annoyed, and even a little angry at that reaction.

There is often a tendency by adults to look back on the things they did as kids taking art, dance, or music lessons, and to be embarrassed by them, or to downplay their importance. We joke about how silly we were, how childish we looked, or how terribly unskilled our performances were.

Please, *please* stop that kind of talk.

I understand that we can have different feelings about what we do as children when we grow up and get a different perspective. I also suffer from a lot of self-imposed face-palming when I think of some of the stuff I did as a kid. We aren't always our most intelligent selves when we are growing up. But please hear me clearly, if we express embarrassment at how we engaged in the arts while growing up, this can leave an incredibly deep impression on the kids in our own lives if they hear us.

I think we need to be very careful about how we speak of our childhood selves, not only because we are speaking ill of our own self, but because most of us have kiddos in our lives that are listening more than we think they are. The words we say matter.

Shame can manifest as tension when we are afraid to really let loose in case we are judged. Trauma can rob us of our breath. Bad memories can keep us from trying new things in case we aren't really in a safe place.

My niece is six years old, and she had her first big dance recital last spring. She worked really hard to prepare, and she did a great job. It was also a delight to see the other dancers performing on a big stage in a historical theater in town. I was so proud of her! One thing I don't want her to ever feel is embarrassment for how she did on stage, or that she was up there at all. But if she hears the adults in her life talking in a self-deprecating way about the dance performances or recitals they did when they were children, she might learn that she should be embarrassed by her dancing. Or she might learn one day that she *should* be embarrassed by her dancing. I hope that never, ever happens.

If you were lucky enough to be able to participate in the arts as a kiddo, whether in school or in extracurricular activities, those experiences have shaped you. I understand that sometimes those experiences can be negative, but you still have nothing to be ashamed of. Kids are kids, and it is normal for them to do things that are age-appropriate for their skill level, and that are fun. It is not okay for adults to shame them for that, even if that adult is you looking back on your childhood self. You did a hard thing, putting yourself on stage as a kid, and that should be celebrated. Your feelings of pride and confidence can encourage the kiddos in your life now to also do the hard thing of performing on stage, and we can teach them to be proud of themselves instead of ashamed.

We aren't (most of us) therapists, and so it is important to remember appropriate boundaries when working with clients.

However, I don't think it will come as any surprise that the emotional and mental connections we have made to our singing can affect our technique. Shame can manifest as tension when we are afraid to really let loose in case we are judged. Trauma can rob us of our breath. Bad memories can keep us from trying new things in case we aren't really in a safe place. It's all connected, and we are working with whole human beings and all the baggage that goes along with that. Being aware of how all that stuff in the past can affect current technique is a good holistic way of teaching voice. It's not easy work all of the time, but it's worth it, and how we view our own past performances could make a *huge* difference in how the kids in your life view their own experiences. If you have trouble changing how you think about things for your own self, do it for the kiddos in your life that don't need any extra shame piled on. The world is hard enough.

For teachers that work primarily with child singers, you have the wonderful privilege and awesome responsibility of writing good things on the hearts of your students now, so that when they get to be adults, they have the memories of what you told



Heather Nelson having fun with adult singers

them in their heads. It's impossible for anyone never to hear anything negative about their singing or about themselves. Humans can be terribly cruel to each other. But if you repeatedly, and I mean *repeatedly*, tell them the truth about their singing, that can create a deep well of truth that they can go back to when they need it. We can teach our kiddos *and* our adults to listen for the positives as they deal with the negative things that come at them. After all, we're not really teaching singing. We're teaching people, using singing as the medium. Let's do our jobs well!

Dr. Heather Nelson, mezzo soprano, loves all the things that have to do with the singing voice and telling other voice teachers about all the neat things she learns. Based in Springfield, MO, she works with voice teachers from all over the world to understand the voice better, and use that knowledge to make a positive difference in their studios. She enjoys cooking (and eating) good food, British TV, and spending time with her favorite dynamic duo, Dooley the dog and Sis the cat. Find more information at www.drheathernelson.com and www.instagram.com/drheathernelson.

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