



Written by
Frances Atwood

Setting up a singing group for older people

- Have clear aims
- Choose a suitable venue
- Build a team
- Choose the songs
- Provide a safe environment
- Enjoy the sessions!

Background

Singing is a wonderful way to offer spiritual support to seniors: it draws people together into a sense of community; it is good for physical health, encouraging deeper breathing; it enables expression of a range of emotions; it can stimulate memory and other areas of the brain; it requires listening and cooperation, a truly sociable activity that enables connections, and it is fun! It is also an easy activity to offer with a minimum of resources that most people can participate in, including those living with dementia who may be struggling with verbal communication. All that is needed is a comfortable space, a confident singer and some ideas of songs you might sing.

1 Have clear aims

Decide the purpose for setting up this group. Is the goal to combat isolation, for example? Are you hoping to outreach into the local community? Do you aim to change the stereotypes around age, physical and emotional well-being? Choose a name that reflects the desired character of the group. Think about your ideal group size and how you will recruit members.

2 Choose a suitable venue

Find a venue that has easy access, adequate parking, a safe entrance (ramps or flat) and wide doorways for wheelchairs. Determine whether the venue has good access to toilets (including for those with disabilities) and adequate lighting. Find a space that has minimal external noise and disturbance. If serving refreshments, find out if there is access to a kitchen.

In the room, provide suitable chairs (preferably with arms) and plenty of space to move around and accommodate walking frames etc. Ideally find a space that does not have many hard surfaces so that sound levels remain tolerable. If renting the space, check insurance and other contractual requirements. Consider the suitability of available time slots. If there is a cost to hiring the venue, consider with the host organisation how this will be met (e.g. through local grants or making a small charge/requesting a donation). Costs may also include refreshments and copying of song sheets if you decide to use them.

3 Build a team

Build a team of volunteers with a variety of skills. The person leading the singing needs to be confident (not necessarily a fantastic singer). An accompanist is a bonus, but not essential. Volunteers can arrange furniture, welcome guests, encourage them during sessions and ensure they depart safely. They can help provide refreshments and clear up afterwards. Team members need relevant safeguarding training and DBS certificates, plus any other specified training from the host organisation.

4 Choose the songs

Be open to guests' preferences – they may surprise you! Begin with familiar songs to develop confidence, then add to the repertoire (YouTube and Spotify are helpful sources.) Use a theme (e.g. countries) and include songs from different eras and styles. Avoid war-time songs as these may spark painful memories. Note group favourites to sing again. Guitar accompaniment or backing tracks can add rhythm and variety. Have a range of speeds and moods. If there are musicians among your guests willing to play, first check they can accompany singing with suitable pace and confidence. Consider using percussion instruments, including some one-handed ones. Introduce scarves or flags to encourage physical exercise to music. Decide if you will use word copies/folders, a projector or will only sing well-known songs.

5 Provide a safe environment

Check the room before sessions for trip hazards or any other risks. It makes sense to have emergency contact details for your group, in case of illness, accidents or unexpected absence; if stored on a database you need signed consent for this. Record any health conditions or allergies (if serving refreshments). One of the team should have up to date first-aid training. Have an incident book to note any accidents and how they are dealt with. If someone needs support during sessions, a carer might accompany them.

6 Enjoy the sessions

Record feedback from the guests. Include the group in decisions for future themes and song choices, and explore if they would like to perform e.g. to friends or family. (Performance creates a sense of team, pride in achievement and may challenge ageist perceptions of seniors.) Emphasise the positive benefits to health and well-being. Laugh and enjoy the sessions – no matter what the quality of the singing!

Further resources:

Diana Kerr, *Singing Groups for People with Dementia: A guide to setting up and running groups in community and residential settings* (The Choir Press, 2015).

Lyrics and Lunch (lyricsandlunch.org)

Singing for the Brain by Alzheimer's Society (alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/your-dementia-support-services/singing-for-the-brain)

Silver Song Music Box (singforyourlife.org.uk/the-silver-song-music-box)

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BRF Ministries, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE
+44 (0)1865 319700 | enquiries@brf.org.uk
brf.org.uk

