

Shared IDEAS

A collection of classroom-tested ideas for motivation and success.



Slow Down: The Key to Fluent Kriah

BY: RABBI YAAKOV AICHENBAUM

A young child singing himself to sleep at night to the letters of the *alef bets* is *nachas* to his parents' ears. A first or second grade child who is struggling to learn the letters and *nekudos* is a source of concern and worry. Why is it that some children find it more difficult to become fluent in *kriah* than others?

The development of reading and *kriah* skills is a well-researched and understood topic. A simple understanding of the wondrous brain that Hashem created sheds tremendous light on the *kriah* process. Basically, beginning readers process written text with the frontal lobe of their brains. The frontal lobe is slow, analytical, and requires conscious effort. That is why beginning readers will often whisper what they are reading quietly to themselves before saying it out loud. As *kriah* skills are mastered, *kriah* processing moves to the occipital lobe in the rear of the brain. The occipital lobe processes written text instantly without conscious thought. This shift is what produces *kriah* fluency.

The wiring of some children's brains does not promote this shift easily. As a result, they have trouble learning different

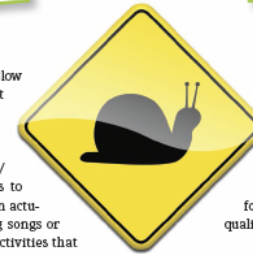
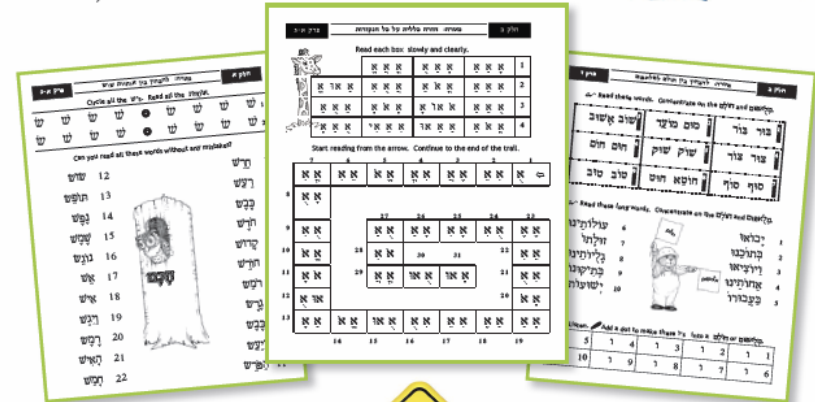
kriah skills and their *kriah* is not fluent. However, even children without any so called wiring glitches sometimes are not fluent in their *kriah*. Once any peripheral issues such as hearing, vision, or attention are ruled out, the most likely cause of weak *kriah* lies in the way it was taught. *Kriah* fluency necessitates instructional techniques that promote the processing shift from the frontal

lobe to the occipital lobe. This is the key to fluent *kriah* that is often overlooked.

Each *kriah* skill needs to be overlearned. The definition of overlearning is reviewing a skill again and again even after it has already been mastered.

It is a mistake to think that once a child has mastered a letter, *nekudah* or grammatical skill, he no longer needs to practice it. Each *kriah* skill needs to be overlearned. The definition of overlearning is reviewing a skill again and again even after it has already been mastered. This review is continued until the skill is totally automatized. Overlearning fosters the processing shift in the brain. Unfortunately, *kriah* teachers often rush the process too much and introduce new skills before previously learned skills are automatized. As a result, children are trying to process too many skills simultaneously with the frontal lobe of the brain and their *kriah* is not fluent.

It is a mistake to think that once a child has mastered a letter, *nekudah* or grammatical skill, he no longer needs to practice it. Use creative *kriah* sheets or programs until the skill is totally automatized.



The solution is actually quite simple. Slow down. The *siddur* party can wait! You do not need glitzy or cute worksheets and you do not need to represent the letters in mnemonic shapes. Instruction needs to be slower with more review of basic letter/*nekudah* combinations. This review needs to be done in an active way with the children actually reading written text (not only singing songs or passively listening to others read). Many activities that *mechanchim* and parents can use to actively review *kriah* skills can be found on the *kriah* page of my website (www.thekeytotorah.com/kriah-page.html).

This easy fix would eliminate a large percentage of the *kriah* issues of children who do not have any language processing disorders. Children who do have language-processing issues will also gain tremendously from slower instruction. They might still need more intensive remediation, but they will be further ahead than they would be in a faster paced class.

Some might argue that slower *kriah* instruction will delay the start of a school's Chumash program. Maybe, but what's the rush? *Kriah* is the foundation of all future learning and the time that is invested in building a solid foundation in *kriah* is an investment that will more than pay for itself in the long-run both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum teaches *kriah*, Chumash and Gemara to students with learning difficulties in Baltimore as well as to online students around the world. He also presents professional development programs for *mechanchim* in schools and at national conferences. Many *kriah* and chinuch resources are available on his website, www.thekeytotorah.org. He welcomes your feedback and questions at yaakov@yb.edu or (570) 646-6488.

¹ While this is contrary to what is commonly espoused by some educators (and I am a special ed. teacher myself!), the opinion of many gedolei yisrael is that the *alef bets* should not be made frivolous under normal circumstances. For example, see *With Hearts Full of Love* by Ho-Rav Mattisyahu Salomon shlitza, page 243.

