

## **Now is the winter of her reading lessons**

By Esther Baird

Mon Jan 19, 2009, 04:53 PM EST

BEVERLY, MASS. -

Well the holidays are over and the long grim march through the winter has begun. Maybe you love January through April. Perhaps you find all the darkness and snow and freezing temperatures exhilarating. That's cool, but we probably won't be friends.

We just returned from a three-week holiday stint in Miami. So I know with certainty that there are warmer, sunnier, saner places to be. Places with palm trees and sand. Nevertheless, home is home, and ours is snowed in on Prospect Hill. To keep ourselves occupied this winter, my older daughter and I are learning how to read.

She's learning to read English. I'm learning to read classical Hebrew. One of us is a great student and enjoys her newly acquired skills. One of us is just short of throwing a temper tantrum about certain requirements in certain graduate programs being non-optional.

Tantrums aside, it's been useful to be at such a novice level together. We both have flash cards. We both have fairly bad penmanship. We both can hardly imagine life outside of the present tense, and we both are irritated by exceptions. But exceptions are the norm when learning to read regardless of the language. Sure, your basic "cat," "bat" and "mat" words are fairly straightforward. But you can only go so far in English with three-letter, short-vowel, words. In fact you can't go far at all: f-a-r being one of the many words that add an exceptional twist. Just when you grasp short 'a' you confront "ar." As in "bar", or "car", but not, in yet another exception, in "war," which obviously should be spelled "woar."

I take solace in the fact that next year there will be a competent and well trained kindergarten teacher just waiting to explain all those mysteries to my daughter. Certainly I'm not explaining them. I'm merely a columnist and freelance writer with a love for hyphens — what do I know about spelling and grammar? For now, I prefer to speckle in rules that I feel should exist while my daughter is young and impressionable.

For example, she asked, "Mommy, do I say 'too' with an 'oo' like in moooo?"

"Yes, sweetie!" I beamed.

"But this 'to' only has one 'o'. Do I say 'toh'?"

“Hmmm. Not exactly, it’s actually still pronounced toooo,” I said knowing the next question.

“Why?”

And the problem is, I have no idea why they are pronounced differently. Plus, she’s only four. Trying to explain prepositions versus adverbial indicators of toooo much or toooo many is perhaps a bit toooo complicated.

So I said the next best thing, “Well, there is a magical, invisible ‘o’ at the end. Only you can see it and it will help you say it the correct way.” My daughter immediately grasped this rule. What’s not to understand about make-believe letters?

When teaching her about silent “e,” I explained that the “e” at the end of the word made the middle vowel say its name in a loud, firm voice.

“I’ll spell the word ‘bike’ and you listen to me pronounce the ‘i’ in the middle,” I said. My daughter nodded seriously and watched me.

“B,” I said.

Then, I pumped my fist in the air, “My name is ‘I’!” I shouted and then I finished the word. She stared.

“See sweetie? The ‘E’ made the ‘I’ say its name loudly and clearly while it remained super quiet and the end.”

She nodded and then gave it a whirl. She spelled out ‘bike’ complete with the fist pump and the shout. She then tried it with ‘rope’. Same shout, same pump. Another perfect rule.

Between the fist pumping and the invisible letters, not to mention the finger to the lips whenever there is the digraph ‘sh’, reading has become a fully kinesthetic activity.

And it’s working. She is interested and excited by the process and that’s no small thing. I know this because learning to read classical Hebrew has neither excited, nor interested, me. Perhaps if there were just one or two motions, or a single, magical letter — but no. I guess my program knows a diploma is motivation enough.

So winter may move along at a more rapid clip for my daughter. Imagine the fun of diphthongs and consonant blends! I see somersaults and jumping jacks in her grammatical-phonics future. As for me, I see a slushy crawl through classical Hebrew and a lot of wistful thoughts of palm trees and sand.

Shalom.

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