Summer Reading Incentives
Positive or Pernicious?
Suzanne M. Stauffer

School is out for most kids, and that can mean only one thing for librarians—summer reading programs! Children's librarians across the nation have spent months planning activities, booking performers, and purchasing reading logs, bookmarks, and incentives to motivate children to read during the summer to maintain their ability and to help them develop a love of reading for its own sake.

Although few librarians seem to question the value of incentives in reaching these goals, the practice is not without its critics. In 1956, both Frank G. Jennings and Mary Gaboda summarized the results of a survey of children's librarians' attitudes toward reading incentives that had been published in the October 15 issue of Junior Libraries.1

Jennings, the executive director of the Library Club of America, spoke for those who supported the use of tangible rewards as being necessary to compete with the lure of television and to "persuade children into the habit of reading."2

Arguing against reading incentives, Gaboda, Grosse Point (Michigan) Public Library children's librarian, wrote that "reward-type incentives" shifted children's goals from "enjoying a reading experience to the winning of a contest," and that such "extrinsic motivation undermines integrity and encourages dependence on lures and irrelevant rewards."3

Thirty years later, Carol-Ann Haycock and Jo-Anne Westerby each wondered whether what Haycock calls the "quantitative competitive approach" taken by most library Summer Reading programs was worth the effort.4

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Programs promote, as Westerby puts it, “competition and love of winning or love of reading,” suggesting that “we are losing sight of the real goal—that of reading as opposed to record breaking.”

In 1999, Doug Johnson, Director of Media and Technology at I.S.D. 77 in Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools, suggested that giving rewards for reading was “creating fat kids who don’t like to read.” He based his conclusion on the 1993 book, Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, As, Praise, and Other Bribes, in which author Alfie Kohn contends that “extrinsic motivation not only doesn’t achieve long-term desired behaviors but actually works against building those very habits and attitudes,” including an intrinsic love of reading.

As far as I can determine, no one has ever studied the effect of such incentives on children’s performance in the Summer Reading Program or on their long-term reading behaviors and attitudes. However, psychologists have investigated the effect of extrinsic rewards on the development of intrinsic motivation since the early 1970s. Although they disagree on the theoretical explanation for the findings, they agree that extrinsic rewards inhibit the development of intrinsic motivation even for potentially pleasurable activities. In Kohn’s words, rewards “smother people’s enthusiasm for activities they might otherwise enjoy.”

A meta-analysis of ninety-six experiments in 1994 by Cameron and Pierce concluded that “verbal praise and positive feedback enhance people’s intrinsic interest,” but that other types of rewards “can have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation when they are offered . . . for engaging in a task without consideration of any standard of performance.” They recommended that any reward other than verbal praise or social recognition “offered in educational and other settings be delivered contingent on performance.” Deci, Koestner and Ryan analyzed those experiments plus an additional thirty-two and found that “the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation is clear and consistent. . . tangible rewards had a significant negative effect on intrinsic motivation for interesting tasks . . . [but] verbal rewards . . . had a significant positive effect on intrinsic motivation.”

Although Cameron, Banko and Pierce call the negative effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation a “myth,” even they admitted that “rewards have different effects under different moderating conditions.” Their analysis finds that “when people are offered a tangible reward for [either] doing a task or for doing well at a task, they often choose to do the activity less in a free-choice period.” The amount of interest they report in the task is also negatively affected, but “verbal rewards are found to increase free choice and task interest” for tasks that are inherently interesting.

A study by Joussemet et al. of the effect of rewards on children’s attitudes toward uninteresting tasks found that “the effects of rewards were . . . either null or negative,” and that overall, “rewards had a pernicious effect.” They conclude that “rewards bring about compliance as long as they are operative, but . . . this popular method may impede the longer-term goal of autonomous internalization and regulation that is well integrated into the sense of self.”

Their findings suggest that rewards are not necessary for the development of intrinsic motivation for interesting activities, and that the best method for developing motivation for uninteresting tasks is to encourage self-initiation and responsibility through goal-setting and free choice.

In a review of the research on the effect of rewards on children’s motivation to read, Ken Haycock reported that rewards made no difference in the reading motivation of fourth-grade students. Their interest was affected by “choice, characteristics of books, personal interests, and knowledge gained from books.” Motivation was increased when an adult gave them books, read to them, and shared books with them.

What does all of this mean for summer reading programs? It doesn’t mean that you’ve wasted your time planning activities and programs. In fact, you could probably teach the researchers a thing or two about developing motivation for reading. Guthrie et al. found that “stimulating tasks, such as hands-on science observations and experiments” presented along with “books on the topics of the stimulating tasks,” something most children’s librarians do routinely, led to “longer term intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension.” It does mean that you might consider replacing tangible “incentives” with the verbal praise and social recognition that research suggests have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation. Johnson recommends letting kids set their own goals, allowing kids to read magazines and comics as well as books, providing opportunities for kids to share their reading with each other, recognizing them for meeting their individual goals with certificates and public acknowledgments (such as star charts or more creative means), and giving books as prizes if tangible rewards are necessary.

Lu Benke, a Lead Librarian for Children’s Services at Fort Collins (Colo.) Public Library, developed a program that uses altruism as an incentive. Now in its seventh year, Readers to the Rescue raised more than $1,700 for Mountain State Horse Rescue and Rehab its first year, $2,500 for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International its second, and $2,500 for the Rocky Mountain Raptor Program its third. A quick search of the Internet for “Readers to the Rescue” reveals that other libraries have adopted the idea with equal success.
If you find yourself thinking, "If I don't give incentives, no one will come," ask yourself what that says about the children's real motivation and the program's real effect.

References and Notes

8. Ibid. 398.
11. Ibid. 22.
12. Ibid. 21.