

A Closer Look at Reading Incentive Programs

By **Alfie Kohn**

All those reading incentive campaigns inflicted on elementary school children across the country provide sobering evidence of just how many parents and educators are trapped by Skinnerian thinking. They also illustrate the consequences of extrinsic motivators more generally. Asked about the likely results of [“Book It!”](#), Pizza Hut’s food-for-reading program, educational psychologist John Nicholls replied, only half in jest, that it would probably produce “a lot of fat kids who don’t like to read.”

Consider the following excerpt from a recent article in USA Today:

When school let out for the summer, a Philadelphia mother was concerned her 9-year-old son would take a three-month vacation from reading. “He has not learned to love books,” Christina Long said then. “He only reads what’s required of him.” That was before Greg Prestegord learned he could earn packs of baseball cards and other prizes by reading books through his library’s summer reading programs. Two days later the avid baseball fan checked out six books. “That’s why I’m doing it,” Greg says. “I must have a million baseball cards.”

The article goes on to note that this summer program is similar to others around the country that offer movie parties, zoo passes, and other prizes to children who pick up enough books. Presumably the librarians who administer them and the parents who support them have the very best of intentions. But if Ms. Long is typical, they are not listening to what their children are telling them. Greg is both candid and unequivocal: baseball cards are “why I’m doing it,” he says. Thus, he is still reading (as his mother puts it) “only . . . what’s required of him”; the only thing that has changed is that reading is now required to get a card instead of a grade. A program that turns vacation reading into something one has to do to obtain a reward is hardly likely to produce children who have “learned to love books.” Quite the contrary.

“But at least he’s reading now,” Ms. Long might protest. “At least he’s being introduced to new books!” And this is true. The reward buys us a behavior — in this case, the act of checking out a book and reading it. But at what price? The quality of performance in general and of learning in particular tend to decline significantly when people are extrinsically motivated (see chapters 3 and 8). Moreover, once the library runs out of baseball cards, children are not only unlikely to continue reading; they are less likely to read than they were before the program began. Think about it: reading has been presented not as a pleasurable experience but as a means for obtaining a goody.

The experience of children in an elementary school class whose teacher introduced an in-class reading-for-reward program can be multiplied hundreds of thousands of times:

The rate of book reading increased astronomically . . . [but the use of rewards also] changed the pattern of book selection (short books with large print became ideal). It also seemed to change

the way children read. They were often unable to answer straight-forward questions about a book, even one they had just finished reading. Finally, it decreased the amount of reading children did outside of school.[1]

Notice what is going on here. The problem is not just that the effects of rewards don't last. No, the more significant problem is precisely that the effects of rewards do last, but these effects are the opposite of what we were hoping to produce. What rewards do, and what they do with devastating effectiveness, is to smother people's enthusiasm for activities they might otherwise enjoy.

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.... As if grades weren't doing enough damage, tens of thousands of schools now use corporate-sponsored reading incentives. At least as disturbing as Pizza Hut's "Book It!" is something called Accelerated Reader. Here, a school purchases (from a corporation called Advantage Learning Systems, Inc.) a packaged program in which students must choose their reading from a list of accepted titles and then take a fact-based computerized quiz on each book in order to earn points and prizes. Many educators who spend scarce funds on this program simply (and understandably) wish to encourage reading. But what matters more than the fact that children read is why they read and how they read. With incentive-based programs, the answer to "why" is "To get rewards," and this, as the data make painfully clear, is often at the expense of interest in reading itself. The answer to "how," meanwhile, at least with Accelerated Reader, is "superficially": they're skimming for facts they will need for the quiz, which is altogether different from the sort of thoughtful engagement we'd like to see kids come to adopt when they open a book.[2]

In 1997, Jeff McQuillan at California State University published a review of the available research on the effects of reading incentives. He found that the few investigations that did turn up positive effects tended to rely on self-selected samples of students, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions about what actually led to the results. Typically, the studies also failed to compare these students to others who were not in such programs, much less to others who were in programs that didn't involve rewards. (For example, other research has shown that time set aside for free voluntary reading in school is effective at promoting both skills and interest). McQuillan concluded that none of the available studies "showed any clearly positive effect on reading comprehension, vocabulary, or reading habits that could be attributed solely to the use of rewards and incentives, and in one case the practice [of offering rewards] may have led to a decline." He recommended that schools spend money on books rather than on packaged programs that offer extrinsic inducements for reading.[3]

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"Children who see reading as a desirable activity tend to read more frequently and thus develop better reading skills," one group of researchers reminded us. Their 2010 study also found that children who read for extrinsic reasons "have poorer reading skills than do children with lower extrinsic motivation." And this effect proves distressingly durable: Kids with an extrinsic orientation in fourth grade are still weaker readers in sixth grade, and that's true even if their earlier literacy skills are held constant.[4]

No wonder offering kids rewards for reading books reliably backfires. A new study confirms that finding: Children who get a goodie for reading subsequently become less interested in reading. (The only exception in this study was that kids who received a book as a reward remained as interested in reading as those who didn't get a reward at all.)[5] And in a recent multi-district investigation of Accelerated Reader, kids whose elementary schools used A.R. were less excited about books by the time they were in middle school than those whose schools were A.R.-free. A smaller study of third

graders likewise found that “reading incentives were counterproductive.”[6]

One teacher captured all this research in a succinct slogan: “Reading is rewarding when there’s no reward for reading.”[7] (Feel free to print that on a poster and offer it to your local public and school libraries.)

NOTES

1 Barry Schwartz, “Reinforcement-Induced Behavioral Stereotypy: How Not to Teach People to Discover Rules,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 111 (1982): 53n5.

2 For a similar criticism, see Betty Carter, “Hold the Applause: Do Accelerated Reader and Electronic Bookshelf Send the Right Message?” *School Library Journal*, October 1996: 22-25. This article elicited a number of letters to the editor. One fan wrote in to defend Accelerated Reader on the following basis: “If the program is so ineffective, then why are 25,000 schools participating?” In the same issue, however, another librarian reported seeing “parents take books away from children because they didn’t have a high point value and therefore weren’t worth reading.” Other educators have pointed out to me that the Accelerated Reader program has a demoralizing effect on students who don’t read as fluently as their peers, driving home their relative failure in a painfully public way.

3 Jeff McQuillan, “The Effects of Incentives on Reading,” *Reading Research and Instruction* 36 (1997): 111-25. Quotation appears on p. 122.

4 Michael Becker, Nele McElvany, and Marthe Kortenbruck, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Reading Motivation as Predictors of Reading Literacy: A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102 (2010): 773-85; quotations appear on p. 781.

5 Barbara A. Marinak and Linda B. Gambrell, “Intrinsic Motivation and Rewards,” *Literacy Research and Instruction* 47 (2008): 9-26.

6 Multi-district study: Linda M. Pavonetti, Kathryn M. Brimmer, and James F. Cipielewski, “Accelerated Reader: What Are the Lasting Effects on the Reading Habits of Middle School Students Exposed to Accelerated Reader in Elementary Grades,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46 (2002/2003): 300-11. Third-grade study: Gayle M. Stanfield, “Incentives: The Effects on Reading Attitude and Reading Behaviors of Third-Grade Students,” *The Corinthian*, vol. 9, article 8 (2008): 99-116. For an overview of A.R. research, see Stephen Krashen, [“The \(Lack of\) Experimental Evidence Supporting the Use of Accelerated Reader.”](#) *Journal of Children’s Literature* 29 (2003): 16-30. And here are perspectives on A.R. of a [teacher](#) and a [children’s book author](#), respectively.

7 This aphorism is by John T. Spencer, a middle-school teacher turned college professor.

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