

Close the Book on 'Book It!'

March 2007

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By Alfie Kohn

I once asked the late John Nicholls, an expert on motivation and achievement, for his assessment of Pizza Hut's "Book It!" program, which uses fast food as a reward for reading. Nicholls dryly observed that the most likely result would be "a lot of fat kids who don't like to read." This spring I join the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood in calling for an end to this depressingly pervasive program.

*CCFC argues that there are three distinct problems with Book It!, any one of which would be reason for concern. First, it's a prominent example of how corporations are turning schools – and, by extension, kids – into sources of profit. This program is a cheesy gimmick for developing brand loyalty in children while also increasing sales in the short-term because parents presumably will have to buy food for themselves when the child redeems a coupon for a free personal pizza. (For more on corporate inroads into our schools, see the article "The 500-Pound Gorilla" and the anthology *Education, Inc.: Turning Learning into a Business*.)*

If treating children as a captive market isn't disturbing enough, consider what the product is here. Depending on whether a topping is included, personal pizzas contain 27 to 39 grams of fat. Why would educators want to facilitate the marketing of junk food to kids just as we're finally waking up to the childhood obesity epidemic in America?

Finally, and most surprising to some, *Book It!* is educationally counterproductive. As I put it in CCFC's press release: "If I were trying to design a program that would undermine children's interest in books, lead them to read in a shallow fashion, and convince them to avoid challenging texts, I honestly don't think I could top *Book It!* Dangling pizza in front of kids as a reward for reading, much as one might use treats to house-train a puppy, reflects a completely discredited theory of motivation. Indeed, by teaching children that reading is just a means to an end, the program is likely to be not merely ineffective but positively harmful." (For more, see *Punished by Rewards*, or this excerpt from the book dealing with reading incentive programs [including the equally pernicious "Accelerated Reader"], or the article "Newt Gingrich's Reading Plan.")

Several correspondents have recently tried to defend *Book It!* One points out that Pizza Hut is hardly the only company using the schools to advertise or sell things to children. It's not clear, however, why that fact would make any given example less troubling. (Such logic would imply that all problematic practices are justified whenever other, similar practices are also in evidence.)

We might respond similarly to the argument that junk food, too, is ubiquitous. Surely we ought to do whatever we can to stem the tide. In any case, educators shouldn't be lending their imprimatur to it. An implicit alliance between the purveyors of high-calorie food and schools is disturbing for the same reason that we recoil from finding McDonald's outlets in hospital lobbies.

Finally, several people seemed perplexed that anyone would oppose a program that gets kids to read more. This understandable reaction reflects a widespread tendency to look only at behaviors rather than the reasons and motives underlying behavior. As I've often explained, scores of psychological studies have shown that the more people are

rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. It doesn't matter whether children can be induced to read an extra book today; what counts is whether they will still want to read tomorrow. Or, to put it differently, it doesn't matter whether they're motivated; it matters what kind of motivation they develop. Extrinsic inducements like pizza, payment, prizes, and praise are so insidious precisely because they're likely to undermine children's intrinsic motivation – in this case, to read. In fact, the more strongly we want children to become lifelong readers, the more we should work for the abolition of reading-for-reward programs.

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