

Summer Reading Programs: Rewards & Incentives

A Brief Review of the Literature

Incentives. Many summer reading programs use small prizes or rewards as incentives to encourage and motivate children to read each week during the summer. My local public library, for example, gives children a sticker or a stamp in their reading log book to acknowledge that they read their book for the week. Each child then chooses a small prize from the treasure chest. Many of the public libraries in Alberta operate in a similar manner, offering small rewards for weekly reading. This is not uncommon, although it can be problematic as the issue of offering incentives for reading has both adamant followers and critics. Those in favour of the practice argue that children, especially reluctant readers, will read when they receive a prize or reward for doing so (Norton, 1992). In fact, “many teachers and professionals [including librarians] believe that rewards and incentives ignite students’ motivation to read. This is evidenced by the widespread adoption of sponsored reading incentive programs throughout North America” (Cameron, Gear, & Wizniak, 2004, para. 1).

Although most public library summer reading programs usually involve small scale incentives, like stickers, tattoos, or other small prizes, Fiore (2005) describes one library in the United States that awarded points for all reading: parents earned points for reading with their preschoolers, preschoolers earned points for listening to the books their parents read to them; older children earned points for independent reading, as well as reading with others. The collected points are then exchanged for prizes at the end of the summer. As a result of the changes made to their program, which for almost 80 years previously had “focused on school-age readers accomplishing a prescribed amount of

book reading” (p. 25) participation increased almost 1000 percent between 1984 and 1990, when the rewards system was implemented. Participation rates remain high. In 2006, 58 007 children participated in the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library’s Summer Reading Program (Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, 2006).

A Canadian study found that children appreciate the prizes or incentives associated with their libraries’ summer reading programs, although for children in grades six and seven, more important than the prizes was the availability of new books during the summer months (A. Fasick et al., 2005). Although for some parents and children, incentives-based programs are the motivation for active participation in summer reading programs, intrinsic rewards, such as being able to read new books, are a significant factor in some children’s participation as well. The intrinsic motivation for reading is addressed in the literature that advocates against the use of incentives for reading.

Critics of offering incentives for children’s reading provide some strong arguments against the practice. Alfie Kohn, a widely read critic of rewards and incentives, shares a story about a reluctant reader who participated in his local public library summer reading program in order to earn packs of baseball cards and other prizes by reading books. Kohn (1993) suggests that an incentives-based summer reading program, like the one that awards packages of baseball cards in return for books read, turns vacation reading into something one has to do to obtain a reward [which] is hardly likely to produce children who have ‘learned to love books’. Quite the contrary....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. (p. 73-74)

According to Kohn, and others, the experience of reading should be its own reward, and children should not be offered rewards that take away from the intrinsic pleasure that can come from reading a good book.

Ramos and Krashen (1998) found that increased access to books through regular visits to the public library resulted in an increase in the number of books read by a group of inner city school children in Los Angeles. The implication is that “simply providing interesting books for children is a powerful incentive for reading, perhaps the most powerful incentive possible” (p. 614).

Edmunds and Tancock (2003) conducted a study to investigate the influence of various incentives on the reading motivation of a group of children in fourth grade. Readers in this study received no tangible incentives, non-reading related prizes (like pencils, restaurant coupons, etc.), or books. The results of this study do not support previous research which concludes that children’s reading motivation is increased by non-reading related incentives. In fact, the researchers found no difference between the control group and the group that received non-reading related prizes. Similarly, the study found no indication that receiving books as an incentive did not increase student motivation. Although this study indicates that there is no difference in motivation levels between children who receive tangible incentives compared to those who receive no incentives, the researchers note that their findings do not indicate a harmful effect of using books or non-reading related rewards to try and motivate children to read. Incentives did not cause a decrease in reading motivation, which means that if teachers

use incentives they need to recognize that this, and other studies “have revealed that incentives alone have not had a positive impact on children’s reading motivation” (p. 29). This study’s findings have implications for libraries that use incentives to encourage and motivate children’s reading in summer reading programs. Public library staff should use these findings to reflect on their motivations for using incentives and the potential effect of incentives on the children who are participating in the program.

Fiore (2005) suggests that the focus of a summer reading program should not be on the number of books read, but rather on “the enjoyment of books and the camaraderie found in sharing books with peers and significant adults” (p. 24). Competitions and contests that set some children up as winners, while other children lose because they do not read enough books, ultimately work against the summer reading program’s goal of encouraging children to read for pleasure. These kinds of contests do not recognize the time and effort children put into their summer reading. For some children, completing one full length chapter book in a summer is an accomplishment that should be recognized and celebrated as much as the children who read 100 books over the summer.

Benke (2002) describes one library’s attempt to move away from a traditional rewards-based program. Initially, children read the required number of minutes and claimed prizes. For those children who completed the 'game' quickly, they could continue reading and counting minutes, but rather than collecting a reward, they would be helping to sponsor a rescue horse at a local animal shelter. In this particular model, children could read five hours to collect the first prize, read a second five hours to collect a second prize and then keep reading so that every additional five hours would equal a \$1 donation to the animal rescue project. The money donated to the shelter originally came

from the Library's Friends of the Library group, but subsequent donations were gathered from local businesses. The revised program worked extremely well, with a total 8910 extra hours logged over the summer. The author goes on to state that

although the concept of using altruism in summer reading programs is simple, it remains relatively new for children's libraries...Yet using altruism as an incentive bypasses the concerns raised by Kohn and points to a whole new approach. Does altruism motivate children to read? How? Are older children actually becoming more altruistic than younger children? Must the fundraising activity--reading--be closely related to the cause to be effective?

What is the role of parents? (para. 16)

As with any new project, there are often more questions remaining than answers, but this case study provides some interesting ideas to consider when planning and implementing SRPs in public libraries.

Incentive-based summer reading programs are not inherently wrong or bad; however, there are questions about the effectiveness of this approach to motivating children to read. Libraries should consider the structure of their programs and think about the messages they are sending to children and their parents about reading for pleasure. Competitions that reward only those children who read many books over the summer, for example, leave out those children for whom reading might be a struggle. "Librarians and others who care about the youth of our nation and the world need to instill in them an intrinsic love of reading. Voluntary free reading as promoted in summer library reading programs means reading because you want to, not because you are required to (Fiore, 2005, p. 26).

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