

Research Notes

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Rewards for Reading: A Review of Seven Programs

A major issue in educational settings today is whether setting up incentive systems for students facilitates or hinders learning and motivation (Cameron & Pierce, 2002; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Regardless of the controversy, many teachers and professionals 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. Such programs aim to increase the amount of time children spend reading, to improve reading skills, and to make reading enjoyable. The present study was designed to evaluate seven reward-for-reading programs. Table 1 presents a brief description of the seven programs we examined.

Characteristics of an Effective Reward Program

There has been little direct research on the development of effective incentive programs for improving students' reading. However, reviews and meta-analyses of laboratory experiments on rewards and intrinsic motivation (Cameron, 2001; Cameron, Banko, & Pierce, 2001; Cameron & Pierce, 1994, 2002; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Dickinson, 1989; Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996; Flora, 1990) as well as recent experimental research on the use of rewards (Eisenberger, Rhoades, & Cameron, 1999; Pierce, Cameron, Banko, & So, 2003) can help to inform the development of an effective reward-for-reading program. Specifically, rewards have been found to produce positive effects on motivation and performance when:

- the rewards involve spontaneous and sincere positive feedback and praise;
- students are rewarded often and immediately following successful performance;
- students are given occasional unexpected rewards;
- tangible rewards (e.g., prizes, grades, stars, etc.) are given for meeting clear performance standards;
- tangible rewards are given for succeeding at increasingly challenging tasks;

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Table 1
A Description of Seven Reward for Reading Programs

<i>Program</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Rewards</i>	<i>Reward Contingency</i>	<i>Length of Program</i>
Book It	K to grade 6	Pizzas, stickers, buttons	Meet individual teacher-set goals (e.g., number of books read, time reading)	Six months
All American Reading Challenge	K to grade 6	McDonald's meal	Read 10 books; discuss with partner	Until 30 books are read
Books for Bucks	grade 4	\$1.00 per book read	Read book; report to parent or teacher	Varies from weeks to months
Running Start	grade 1	Bookmarks, posters, stickers, books	Read 21 books in 10 weeks	Ten weeks
Read to Discover	K to grade 6	An entry to win a \$1,000 library grant	Read as many books as possible	School term
Minute Maid Summer Program	K to grade 6	Certificates, coupons for Minute Maid products	Read 8 books	Two months
Book Adventure (Internet program)	K to grade 8	Interactive games, printable prizes	Read books from a reading list and pass quizzes	Varies according to teacher/parent preference

- tangible rewards are items students enjoy (e.g., books, computer games);
- students are involved in setting up the reward system;
- student performance is recorded and rewards are phased out when behavior increases.

Our Evaluation of Seven Reward for Reading Programs

Each of the seven reward-for-reading programs was assessed according to whether it met the criteria presented above. Table 2 is a summary of our analysis. Overall, Table 2 shows that *Book It* and *Book Adventure* meet most of the criteria. In contrast to the other programs, students receive rewards in the *Book It* and *Book Adventure* programs when they succeed in meeting increasingly challenging standards. As well, teachers and parents work with students to set up these programs, and students are rewarded often.

Table 2 indicates that most of the programs meet at least some of the criteria. For example, most programs we examined keep detailed records to track student progress, the rewards are items that students enjoy, and praise is given. However, none of the programs phases out the rewards when reading increases.

Survey Evaluations of the Programs

In addition to examining how rewards have been used in such programs, it is of major importance to determine whether the program goals have been met

Table 2
Evaluation of Reading for Reward Programs in Relation to Characteristics of an Effective Reward Program.

	<i>Book It</i>	<i>Reading Challenge</i>	<i>Books for Bucks</i>	<i>Running Start</i>	<i>Read to Discover</i>	<i>Minute Maid</i>	<i>Book Adventure</i>
Reward increasingly challenging tasks	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
Choose rewards students enjoy	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Work with students to set up reward program	YES	NO	NO	YES	No Info	NO	YES
Reward students often	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
Use unexpected rewards occasionally	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
Reward students for meeting performance standards	No Info	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Keep records of performance	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Use spontaneous praise	YES	No Info	YES	YES	No Info	No Info	YES
Phase out reward when behavior increases	NO	NO	NO	NO	No Info	NO	NO

and to assess students' reading skills. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on the effectiveness of the reading reward programs. Instead, most program evaluations are testimonials from teachers, parents, and students who

Table 3
Survey Evaluations of the Reward for Reading Programs

<i>Program</i>	<i>Evaluators</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Results</i>
Book It	IHSSURI* (1986)	2,741 teachers who participated in the program	Teachers reported that students read more, grades improved, and reading attitude improved
Book It	Flora & Flora (1999)	171 undergraduate students (some had participated in <i>Book It</i> and some had not)	No significant differences between groups on amount read, but students reported positive effects of <i>Book It</i>
Bucks for Books	McNinch, Steely, & Davidson (1995)	20 grade 3 students who were in the program	Attitude toward reading changed positively during program
Running Start	Coulson & Hood (2000)	104 grade 2 students (some had participated in program, some had not)	Significant difference between groups on attitude toward reading; those in program had more positive attitudes

*IHSSURI = Institute of Human Science and Services at the University of Rhode Island.

claim that the programs increase reading motivation. A few surveys have examined attitudes toward these programs; Table 3 presents a brief description of these surveys. Overall, the few surveys that have been conducted suggest that students who participate in the programs read more and have a positive attitude toward reading. However, more systematic research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about the benefits for students.

Conclusion

Parents, educators, and administrators want a better understanding of what goes into an effective reward-for-reading program. We propose criteria against which existing programs can be evaluated. What is needed is research directed toward determining the relative importance of each criterion, the relationship between criteria, and the effects on students' reading skills and motivation to read. Our future research will be directed toward assessing the relationship between the procedures used in a reward program and student outcomes.

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