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SundayReview | DISPATCH

The Right Way to Bribe Your Kids to Read

By KJ DELL'ANTONIA JULY 23, 2016

My children need to read this summer. They're in the middle of a long vacation from school, and I want them to enjoy it — but I also want them to be able to pick up their education where they left off when school starts again in the fall.

Kids who read over the summer lose fewer skills than kids who don't. This is especially important for children from low-income families and those with language problems, like my younger daughter. When reading is difficult, so is almost everything else. As new readers move from decoding text to fluency, every subject from math to history becomes more accessible, but practice is the only way to get there.

My kids (15, 12, 10 and 10) have an enviable amount of time to read, and plenty of books to choose from. Yet it's already clear that beyond a late August dash to fulfill their assignments, very few pages are likely to be turned unless I do something. But what?

The answer many parents fall back on is bribery. If I want my children to read, and they'd rather do something else, an incentive seems like a simple solution. In a survey by a British educational publisher, 60 percent of parents of 3- to 8-year-olds admitted offering their children rewards for reading. An even more informal survey of my friends and acquaintances (as in, I asked on Facebook) revealed parents

paying per book, minute or page in currencies that ranged from Shopkins toys to screen time to cash.

Research, though, suggests that paying children to do things they once enjoyed can backfire. Study after study shows that kids who are rewarded for activities like coloring or solving puzzles set the books or puzzles aside when the reward dries up, while those who aren't rewarded carry on with the activities just for fun.

"If you pay kids to read you'll get them to read," said Edward Deci, the author of "Why We Do What We Do" and a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. "They'll continue to read until you end the experiment, and then they'll stop." Rewards encourage children to think of reading as something you have to be paid to do, not something that brings pleasure in itself, he says.

But if offering an incentive for reading is such a terrible idea, why does it still seem so common, even among parents who are aware of the pitfalls?

Perhaps my peers and I are too prone to valuing short-term wins over long-term learning (witness our tendency to "help" our children with homework). Or perhaps we just know how important reading is — and care more that our kids are good at it than that they love it.

Some experts actually agree that rewards can be useful, especially for younger learners. “I think we underestimate the power of extrinsic motivation,” said Rahil Briggs, director of pediatric behavioral health at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. “You want your child to be naturally fascinated, and some are, but some children can benefit from a little bit of a jump-start.”

That doesn’t necessarily preclude the development of intrinsic motivation later, Dr. Briggs said. Although some children love a challenge, for many, it’s hard to find pleasure in reading until it comes easily.

And when it comes to developing reading fluency, timing is important. Fumiko Hoeft, a cognitive neuroscientist and psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, has found that the growth of particular neural pathways when children are young is critical to reading success. “Learning to read requires that we integrate the auditory, speech and visual processes,” she said. In evolutionary terms, it’s a new skill for humankind, and not one we perform instinctively. That kind of learning requires repetition.

What if, instead of focusing on developing a long-term love of literature, we focused on the short-term act of reading itself? That might change the calculus for parents, Dr. Briggs said. Some research suggests that external rewards work well for short-term interventions. “One of the downfalls of extrinsic motivation is that you just have to keep upping the ante to get the same result,” she said. But summer has a natural end, and then school takes over.

If parents do want to offer rewards for reading, Dr. Briggs said, they don’t necessarily have to be money, treats or toys: “It could be that it’s a special thing to go to the library with Dad, and that the alone time is part of what’s rewarding about it.”

Such nonmaterial rewards may be the most effective. Dr. Deci of the University of Rochester and his colleague and collaborator, Richard Ryan, suggest that if reading is something parents value, then it’s the value, rather than the practice and the skill, that we should emphasize. The “bribe” of an excursion with a parent, or of special time reading together or discussing a book, conveys the importance of

reading, said Dr. Ryan. “When we set aside time for reading, or set limits on other activities, we’re showing our children that we support them in developing an important skill.”

When I talked further with the parents who told me that they offered rewards for reading, I found that what looked like bribes were actually closer to what Dr. Deci and Dr. Ryan sought. Payments came with lengthy book discussions. One family went from offering rewards one year to running a book club the next. Parents reflected on years of star charts and prizes, along with years of family trips to the library. Bets were made over who could read the most, and late-night reading under the covers with a flashlight was indulged and encouraged. What I saw — when I really looked — were external motivations to read accompanied by powerful messages about the internal joy to be found in books.

“I think intrinsic motivation is a bit of a learned skill,” said Judi Fusco Kledzik, a friend and learning sciences researcher who initially surprised me by saying that she offers her daughters (now 14, 12 and 10) a penny a page for summer reading and has done so for five years. “So is regulating how you spend your time.” This way, she says, her daughters are inspired to find new books (the books must be grade-level ones they haven’t read before) and to sit down with them. The family spends considerable time, she said, setting goals and talking about the books the girls read.

None of which sounds as easy as just handing over that penny a page. Does it work?

“I would read more books without the program,” said Dr. Kledzik’s oldest daughter, “but easier books, and more comic books.” Her 12-year-old sister doesn’t think she reads more or different books than she would on her own, but the youngest girl does. “Money is motivating,” the 10-year-old said.

Money may be motivating, but so is living in a home where books and reading are part of family life — and it’s that, rather than the various reward programs, that I plan to focus on at our house. Bribes, Dr. Briggs noted, are relatively easy, and many children know it. Reading together, choosing books, talking about words and stories, or even going to the library is “a lot harder than taking a dollar out of our wallets,” she said, and ultimately worth a lot more.

Correction: July 25, 2016

An earlier version of this article omitted the results of a British survey about children's reading habits. Sixty percent of parents of 3- to 8-year-olds said they offered their children rewards for reading.

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