

Why Your Kids Should Avoid Summer Reading Programs

Libraries are ideal examples of local, self-directed learning hubs that support all members of a community in learning naturally, without coercion. Late-nineteenth century steel magnate, Andrew Carnegie, who created many of the first public libraries, stated: “A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.”

This is why I believe that their summer reading programs are beneath them.

Teaching Kids to Hate Reading

Library summer reading programs, while typically voluntary, follow a “schooling” model of education instead of the “learning” one that libraries naturally represent. Setting up reading as a rewards-based competition with specific milestones and markers and comparisons to others creates unnecessary obstacles to a child’s natural curiosity.

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Some libraries try to lessen the coercive burden of summer reading programs by encouraging children to create their own reading goals. For example, children may determine on their own how many and which books to read, or they may decide to read for a certain number of minutes each day or week. This sounds harmless, maybe even helpful, right? The trouble is that setting up “goals” around reading has the potential to externalize the process and take away from the intrinsic pleasure of reading.

“If it weren’t for summer reading programs my kids wouldn’t

read anything over the summer,” some parents might lament. This is the common chorus that is used to validate summer reading programs, while ignoring the much larger, more troubling problem: kids are schooled to believe that reading is work to be avoided.

This is axiomatic given the ways in which schools teach reading. Often reading is taught before kids are ready to learn it, using methods and materials that are completely uninteresting and artificial (remember, don't read ahead!), with high-stakes testing to measure alleged competency.

Summer reading programs perpetuate this framework of forced reading.

Many children have the natural love of reading schooled out of them, and summer reading programs simply perpetuate this framework of forced reading. The vast majority of children who are given the freedom to learn without school [learn to read on their own](#), at their own time and pace, following their own interests.

My older son learned to read by first reading the lyrics to his favorite rock and roll songs, then instruction manuals while helping his dad fix things around the house, and Amazon reviews for items he wanted to purchase, and, yes, Captain Underpants. He loves to read and would never imagine it to be drudgery or something we had to cajole him to do.

Read for the Sake of Reading

Boston College psychology professor and [Self-Directed Education](#) advocate, Dr. Peter Gray, [writes](#):

As long as kids grow up in a literate society, surrounded by people who read, they will learn to read. They may ask some questions along the way and get a few pointers from others who already know how to read, but they will take the initiative in all of this and orchestrate the entire process

themselves."

But what about the children who aren't surrounded by literacy on a daily basis, who don't have parents who love to read, who don't have mountains of books in their homes? What about them?

Libraries have a special opportunity in summer to undo some of the damage of forced schooling.

I would say it's all the more important for those children to learn to appreciate reading for the sake of reading, and not for the sake of a sticker. Libraries and other community-based organizations can use summertime as an opportunity to ignite – or reignite – a child's natural curiosity, to help a child who is deprived of home-based literacy discover the joy and adventure that can be found in books, to help a child understand that why she may want to dig into books all summer is so much more important than a check-mark on a library form or the promise of a plastic frisbee.

Libraries have a special opportunity in summer to undo some of the damage of forced schooling and help children to reconnect with their innate learning instincts. Children are natural learners. They don't need to be coerced or cajoled into learning. They don't need competitions and rewards, however benevolent they may appear.

Children need to be given the freedom to learn what they want, when they want, and how they want with helpful facilitators available to assist. They need to be given the freedom to ask their own questions, to find their own answers, to uncover their own interests without others dictating the way.

Libraries are uniquely designed to support and encourage natural, self-directed learning. It's what they do best. They can help us all move from a schooling culture that often views

reading as a chore, to a learning culture that sees reading as a joy. Avoiding summer reading programs is a good place to start.

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