

How to Help Kids Hate Reading

Readers: Please read this newspaper for 20 minutes every night until you have finished the entire issue. You may read longer, of course, but 20 minutes is the minimum. Use a timer. Record the date and number of articles you read each day, and the reporter. Please also indicate the topic of the article and its genre: opinion, news, feature story, etc.

If keeping that kind of log sounds like a way to turn one of life's remaining pleasures into a chore, why are we making our kids do it? When I asked parents on Facebook for their feelings about schools requiring reading logs, it was like asking the Mitch McConnell Fan Club about Nancy Pelosi.

A typical response: "Hate hate hate reading logs! I had an avid reader (but also extremely literally minded child) who went to school and was required to read 20 mins/night. He started reading exactly 20 mins/night and would quit in the middle of a sentence if the timer went off." Another parent: "My son hates them. They only pressure him to read books he can read quickly, instead of books that challenge him. He wants lots of pages, so he picks simpler titles. That certainly seems counterproductive."

And from a home-schooling mom who assigned the log solely to comply with state regulations: "My son told me last week that I ruined his love of reading."

For the record, moms of daughters also responded. I got in touch with one, who put her daughter Caitlin on the phone. So, I asked Caitlin, "How do you feel about reading logs?" "It's annoying to fill them out," said the tween. "You feel like you can't just read. And last year, I kept losing the logs. I'd find it at the last minute, and it's all crumpled, so I have to uncrumple it, and then I'd have to find all the books I'd read and the authors and the number of pages and what genre it

is and who the illustrator is.”

This kind of torment might make sense if it had the effect educators hope for: instilling the habit and love of reading. But does it? This is a question studied by Sarah A. Pak, a student and research assistant at Princeton, a few years back. She randomly assigned half of a group of 112 suburban second- and third-grade students to a mandatory reading log group and the other half to a “voluntary log” group. Then she surveyed their motivation to read before the experiment and two months in. The result?

“Students with mandatory logs expressed declines in both interest and attitudes toward recreational reading in comparison to peers with voluntary logs.” Reading logs turned a fun, self-directed activity into a top-down chore that chafed at the soul.

As Pak noted, the issue is intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. When you’re intrinsically motivated to do something, you are going to work hard at it and enjoy it more. When someone else is making you do something—even something you used to enjoy on your own—it becomes a drag.

To free their children from this pointless yoke, some parents have gone so far as to resort to subterfuge. “I would use multiple pens and pencils,” Erin Lee, a mom in Worcester, Massachusetts, confessed, “to create the appearance of not having completed the entire thing in one sitting.”

Perhaps even the author of this article has done the same. Perhaps you have, too. Perhaps, then, it’s time for a national “Fall Off the Log” campaign. After all: Reading is fundamental. But reading logs are not.

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