Reading logs without the nightly signature: what the research says

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Are reading logs effective? What three studies found about required logs, rewards and reading for fun, what they didn't test, and gentler alternatives to the nightly log.

The one study that tested a reading log head to head found that second and third graders given a required nightly log, 20 minutes with a parent's signature after each entry, came to like reading for fun less over two months, while classmates whose log was optional came to like it more. Wider research on motivation points the same way: expected rewards tend to dampen children's own interest, and reading for its own sake goes with reading more. None of it tested the alternatives below, so I offer them as sensible, not as settled: count books rather than minutes, fill the log in weekly, make the signature optional, and let the child own the record. Peabody's family reading log is built that way, and is free through the end of 2026.

The study on reading logs

Sarah Pak and Allyson Weseley, The Effect of Mandatory Reading Logs on Children's Motivation to Read, Journal of Research in Education, 2012 (volume 22, number 1). In one district, 112 children aged 6 to 8 were split by class: in some classes, teachers set at least 20 minutes of reading a night, recorded in a log with a parent's signature after every entry; in the others, teachers handed out the same logs, encouraged reading, and said the log was optional. The children answered a reading attitudes survey at the start and two months later.

- Interest in reading went down with the required log, and up with the optional one.
- Attitudes to reading for fun went the same way.
- Attitudes to reading at school went down in both groups.

Its limits matter as much as its findings. It measured how children felt, not how much they read. It was small, in one district, and lasted two months; the authors say themselves that a longer study is needed, and that the effect could fade or add up over years. And it tested one kind of log: a nightly minimum, signed every night. I went through it in more detail in reading logs: do they help or hurt?.

What research on motivation adds

Two larger pieces of work help explain why a required log might backfire, though neither is about logs.

- Rewards and interest. Edward Deci, Richard Koestner and Richard Ryan, A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation, Psychological Bulletin, 1999. Across 128 experiments, expected tangible

rewards for doing an interesting activity tended to reduce how much people chose to do it on their own afterwards, and tangible rewards tended to be more harmful for children than for college students. Positive feedback went the other way: it increased both free choice and reported interest, though less for children than for college students. These were experiments with rewards, not school reading logs, and other researchers have disputed how large the effect is.

• Why children read. Ulrich Schiefele, Ellen Schaffner, Jens Möller and Allan Wigfield, Dimensions of reading motivation and their relation to reading behavior and competence, Reading Research Quarterly, 2012. Reviewing about twenty years of studies, they found that reading out of curiosity and involvement went with reading more for enjoyment and reading better, while reading for grades, recognition or because one has to contributed little or worked against it. The authors are careful to say the cause is not settled: liking reading may make children read more, or reading more may make them like it.

Put together, carefully: a log that feels like a check from someone else is the kind of thing this research would expect to make reading feel less like a child's own choice. That is a reason to be gentle with logs, not proof that every log harms.

Alternatives to the nightly signed log

None of these was tested in the studies above. They follow from what the studies looked at, and from what parents and teachers say about logs.

• Count books, or days with reading, instead of minutes. A book is finished or it isn't, and nobody has to referee a timer. A child who reads a picture book in eight minutes hasn't failed.

• Fill it in once a week, together. Five minutes on a Sunday covers the week without a nightly check.

• Make the signature optional. If a teacher wants to see that a child reads at home, a list of titles may answer that just as well.

• Ask for a line, not a number. A sentence on what happened, or one question a day ("What goes wrong?", "Who would like this book?"), gives a teacher something to talk about.

• Let the child keep it. A shelf they fill, or a chart they colour, belongs to them; a form signed for school belongs to someone else.

• Praise the reading, not the log. The rewards review found positive feedback raised interest, if less for children than for adults. "You finished it! What was the best bit?" costs nothing.

• For a class, count together. A class goal with numbers instead of names, the total on the board and nobody ranked: the class tally does that without collecting anything.

If your school's log is required, its rules come first. Ask the teacher what the log is for, and

whether a weekly list of titles would do.

How Peabody's family log is built

- Books by a tap. A child picks their animal face (never a name) and logs a book: one of the free stories from the library, a book from a kids' list or a series, or a book from home whose title a grown-up types after a two-second hold.
- Any day, filled in later. The week is a row of days to tap, and any day back to a year ago can be filled in, so a weekly catch-up works.
- Minutes only if the school asks. Minutes and pages sit behind the grown-up hold. The page says so plainly: books count on their own, and minutes are never needed.
- A streak that forgives. One missed day a week keeps the streak going, and a missed day never gets a message.
- Prints your way. The week or the month prints as just the log, with a line to sum up each day, or with a question a day for grades 2 to 5, and with or without a signature line. The minutes column stays blank if nobody typed minutes.

Everything logged stays on the device. Peabody hears only that the log was opened, used or printed, never what was read.

Questions parents ask

Are reading logs effective?

It depends on what you want them to do. The one study that tested a required nightly log found it went with children liking reading less over two months; it didn't measure how much they read. A log a child keeps because they want to was not tested at all.

Is it all right to ask the teacher to drop the signature?

I'd ask what the log is for first. Many teachers want to see that reading happens at home, and a weekly list of titles, signed once, may be enough.

Do rewards for reading backfire?

The 1999 review found that expected tangible rewards tended to lower children's later interest in an activity they already enjoyed, and that praise tended to raise it, though by less for children than for college students. It was not about reading programmes in particular, so I'd keep prizes small and the praise warm.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/reading-log-alternatives