Certificates and rewards: what motivates a reader

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What studies say about rewarding children for reading, why choice and a finish line matter more than prizes, and how Peabody's free reading certificate is earned.

What keeps a child reading is mostly the reading: a book they chose, at a level they can manage, and a finish line they can see. Prizes can sit on top of that, but the studies I opened, taken together, suggest that a reward a child expects does little to make a reader, and in some experiments it took something away. A certificate at a real finish line is a smaller thing than a prize: it records what the child did rather than paying them to do it. This guide is what those studies found, what to do instead of prizes, and how Peabody's certificate is earned. Peabody is free through the end of 2026.

Rewards in the lab (1999)

In 1999 Edward Deci, Richard Koestner and Richard Ryan pooled 128 experiments in a meta-analysis published in Psychological Bulletin. Rewards that people expected for doing, finishing or doing well at an interesting activity made them less likely to go back to it in their own free time. Tangible rewards tended to do more harm to children than to college students. Rewards that came as a surprise, after the activity, made no difference either way, and positive feedback raised both free-time interest and how much people said they liked the activity. The authors' own advice is that tangible rewards for children need to be used with great care. It is not the last word: the same journal printed a reply disputing parts of it.

A book or a token (2004)

A 2004 University of Maryland dissertation by Barbara Marinak, supervised by Linda Gambrell, tested rewards on reading itself. Seventy-five third graders read from one of six books being considered for the school library. Afterwards some were given a book, some a token and some nothing, and then had ten free minutes to keep reading, do a jigsaw or play a maths game. The children given a book, and the children given nothing, showed more motivation to keep reading than the children given a token. Whether a child chose their reward made no apparent difference.

Paying children to read (2011)

The largest test I opened is the economist Roland Fryer's field experiments, published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in 2011. In Dallas, second graders in 21 schools were paid $2 for each book they read and passed a short quiz on, up to 20 books a semester. Children in

those schools read twelve books on average that year. The effect on state test scores was statistically zero overall, though there was a gain for children in regular, English-language classes; and Fryer found little sign that the payments lowered the children's own interest. By those measures, the money neither helped much nor did harm.

Logs with a minimum (2012)

A 2012 study by Sarah Pak and Allyson Weseley in the Journal of Research in Education gave some second and third grade classes a required reading log, 20 minutes a night with a parent's signature, and others an optional one. Over two months, interest in reading fell with the required log and rose with the optional one.

What they have in common

None of these says a reward is poison. What they share is a warning about control: when reading becomes something done for someone else's prize or someone else's signature, some children decide it isn't something they would choose on their own. The things that went with more reading, or with liking it more, were a choice about the reading itself, a reward that was itself a book, and positive feedback.

What to do instead of prizes

- Let them choose. The book, the challenge, even the number to aim for. A goal a child set is a goal they own.
- Make the finish line visible. A chart on the fridge that fills a square or a step at a time shows progress without anyone saying a word.
- Say what they did. "You finished the whole thing" is feedback about the reading. In the 1999 meta-analysis, positive feedback raised interest, though less for children than for college students.
- If you want a treat, make it a surprise, and make it about books. A library trip, or a new book they choose, once the challenge is done. Unexpected rewards made no difference in the meta-analysis, and in Marinak's study a book as a reward did no harm.
- Keep the level right. A book that is too hard needs a prize to get through. Books by level has Peabody's free stories at each of nineteen levels, measured from each story's text, never from the child.

A certificate is not a prize

A challenge's certificate is earned one way: by reaching its finish line. It prints then, and not before. There is no certificate for half way, no prizes and no leaderboards.

- Winter Break, 19 December 2026 to 3 January 2027: the top of the mountain, at 10 books for ages 5 to 7, 6 for 8 to 10 and 4 from 11 up.

- January: twenty coloured days out of 31. A day colours in with a finished book or 20 minutes of reading, and a missed day stays empty with no message about it.
- 100 Books: the hundredth book.
- Book Bingo: all 25 squares. Five in a row is a Bingo, which is its own small finish.
- Read-Aloud 20: twenty books read aloud to a little one.

A certificate the child knows is coming is, strictly, an expected reward, and I won't pretend otherwise. What I have tried to do is keep it small and honest: a sheet of paper that says what the child read, at a finish line they chose to go for, with nothing to win and nobody to beat. For a challenge of your own, the certificate page is a blank certificate to fill in by hand.

About pizza

Pizza Hut's BOOK IT! runs in schools from October to March. When I opened its page on 30 October 2026, it said teachers track each child's daily reading minutes, and a child who meets the month's goal gets a certificate for a Personal Pan Pizza; homeschool families set goals in an app, with up to five pizza certificates per family a month. If your child's class does it, enjoy the pizza. What I would add at home is a book your child chose and a finish line they picked.

Finding the next book

The best reward for finishing a book is a good next one. Peabody's library has 425 free stories anyone can read with no account, and what should I read next asks three tap-to-answer questions (what kind, how long, alone or together) and picks one.

Questions parents ask

Should I pay my child to read?

In Fryer's Dallas experiment, $2 a book neither raised test scores overall nor lowered the children's interest. If you want to give something, Marinak's study suggests a book they choose is a better reward than a token.

Is a reading certificate a reward?

Yes, a small one. A Peabody challenge's certificate only prints at the finish line, so it records something the child did rather than standing in for it.

My child only reads for the prize. What now?

Keep the prize for this round, then try a challenge with no prize and a chart the child fills in. Let them pick both the book and the challenge.

Can I print a certificate for our own challenge?

Yes. The certificate page is a blank to fill in by hand, for any challenge your family makes up.

Free at peabody.kids/guides/reading-rewards-and-certificates