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# Advertising a Summer Reading Program to Elementary Students



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Summer of 2012, I was a Summer Reading Program (SRP) intern at the Beaverton City Library (BCL). At the start of the internship, I accompanied librarians on school visits about summer reading. We presented a skit that included students and promoted “Dream Big, Read.”

Last summer, I joined in the fun of “Fizz, Boom, Read.” Though I didn’t go on school visits, my coworker’s test runs of the baking soda and vinegar “explosion” delighted me. That year BCL’s skit featured mad scientists portrayed by a pair of library staff members and two students volunteers.

In the skit, students wander into a “lab” and Dr. Fizz and Dr. Frizzle create a baking soda and vinegar explosion. The cast then shares a conversation about the SRP. Dr. Fizz encourages everyone to “visit the Beaverton City Library or our website ... to pick up your reading log.” The scientists tout fun science activities, prizes for registration and completion, and the opportunity to check out books and media.

BCL also provided materials for parents and guardians. Adults received a flier that students took home. The flier included the dates of the SRP, number of reading hours required, and types of prizes for finishers. The hand out also contained a calendar of free, library events for children.

I started to wonder—skits are so fun for us library employees, but when do they work best for kids? I began to answer that question when I took the class “Persuasion” from Dr. Alan Mikkelson at Whitworth University. In studying a skit as a persuasive attempt, I identified three important features of skits and handouts and one new idea for take home materials.

## 1) The skit is all about the kids

Our skits will do best when we include peers. BCL does so through two characters. BCL asks school staff to recruit two student volunteers ahead of the performance. The students get to run through the lines and hold scripts. Participating is not supposed to be scary! Students even use their real names. By including students, the discussion about SRP is more natural and persuasive:

**Dora:** I love reading—I want to join! Right now, I’m reading a nonfiction book about the planets. Can we read nonfiction?

**Dr. Fizz:** Sure, you can read all kinds of books—books about space, animals, poetry, scary stories, just about anything you want!

**Alan:** Can we join right now?

We know including children makes a difference for two reasons. First, we are more likely to follow through on our attitudes when we perceive social support (Ajzen, 1991). Since the student actors each say “I want to join,” the audience sees that their peers encourage participation in summer reading. Second, kids like the skit more for including peers. Advertisements are more appealing to kids when they are “child relevant.” (Hota et al., 2010). When students see their peers on stage they are more likely to think “this skit is for children like me”—the very definition of child relevance according to Hota et al. (2010). And child relevance makes a difference because kids’ attitudes about an advertisement are linked to their attitudes about what is being promoted (Hota et al., 2010).



## 2. We want kids to “think I can!”

When a strong skit finishes, the students are clear on how to sign up. BCL helps kids understand the registration process:

**Dr. Fizz:** The Summer Reading Program begins Sunday, June 1st. Just visit the Beaverton City Library or our website between June 1st and July 21st to pick up your reading log, get your Thorns soccer ticket, a swim pass from THPRD, and a round of golf. You have until August 13th to turn in the reading log and receive your prizes.

Setting aside the time to talk through logistics of registration when there are so many fun activities to highlight is worth it because of the concept of perceived behavioral control. Our attitudes about an activity, like registering for summer reading, are more likely to influence our behavior when we believe we can succeed (Ajzen, 1991). In our case, Dr. Fizz describes how to register and so perceived behavioral control depends on whether kids think that their parents will comply.

## 3. Parents (and kids) want to know “why summer reading?”

Skits should demonstrated three characteristics of SRP.

- 1) Summer reading is fun.
- 2) Summer reading is easy.
- 3) Summer reading is needed.

By covering these characteristics, we address the three concerns of parents that do not participate in SRP, according to a 1997 study by Walter and Markey.

The first concern parents have, that SRP is not enjoyable, can be addressed by helping kids get excited about SRP. BCL’s skit shows that SRP is fun by describing activities:

**Alan:** ... Summer vacation is great, but sometimes I get bored because there is nothing to do.

**Dr. Fizz:** There is a ton of things to do at the library, like you can see a puppet show and Bob the Magician! To find out about the different shows at the library this summer, be sure to take home this flyer that describes the summer reading program and has a calendar of all the great library events.

The other two concerns, that SRP takes too much time and is not needed might be better addressed in a hand out to parents. We can show that SRP is easy with an explanation that parents can register online. The simplicity of SRP can also be shown by stating the number of books or hours to be read and what counts. For example, parents that think they do not have time to read aloud might be happy to learn that that audiobooks count.

The last concern, that SRP are not needed, could be the easiest for us to forget to address. We might think it is obvious that SRP are good for kids. But, some parents said they thought their kids did not need a reading program either because they like to oversee their kids’ education, read their own books, don’t think they needed incentives, or were unaware of the program (Walter & Markey, 1997).



One option to clear up the misconception that SRP are not useful is to share facts about summer reading loss and gains from summer reading. Make sure to include the source of the information. Rational arguments are at their strongest when they are complete and information is cited (O’Keefe, 1998).


Kids would also like to hear about reading outcomes. Justice et al. (2013) found that children ages 0–17 participated in SRP to practice reading skills. When we tell kids how their reading skills can improve through summer reading we are doing what persuasion calls “explicitly stating a conclusion.” Explicitly stating a conclusion with detail increases persuasiveness (O’Keefe, 1997). Detail helps the audience imagine performing a behavior and perceive that they can accomplish a goal (O’Keefe, 1997). In other words, we can help kids imagine themselves as confident readers when we tell them about SRP outcomes.

#### **4. How do we encourage parents and kids to talk about SRP?**

Some research indicates that we should create advertisements that involve both parents and kids. Walter and Markey (1997) found that a sizable chunk of parents (21%) signed up for SRP because of a notice from their child’s school. But, school was not the only place that parents heard about SRP. The parents who went on to register their children also heard about SRP from their kids. Parents of participants tended to say they fell in the “heard it from school” camp if they also fell in the “heard it from kids” camp.

My guess is that hearing about SRP from kids makes a difference to whether parents actually register because kids are enthusiastic. When children are excited about SRP and talk about it with their parents, the discussion may alleviate their parents’ fear that SRP will not be enjoyable.

Here’s an idea for how to inspire more parents and kids to talk about SRP together. A study by Blom Hoffman, Wilcox, and Dunn (2008) investigated nutrition education for kindergarten and first graders. The nutrition program developed information into a book that parents could read with their child, activities to complete, and a requirement to read the material (77 percent did). The researchers found that the book about nutrition was an effective means of transmitting knowledge.

If any children’s program called for a book as advertising, it would be SRP. Perhaps a booklet could describe a family that participates in a summer reading program and ask families to identify literacy activities they can do together. And if you want to write that story, let me know! I would love to hear about it. 



### **Sources for Summer Reading Facts**

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s “Why Public Summer Reading Programs are Important”

<http://pld.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/pld/pdf/slp-points.pdf>

New York State Library’s “Importance of Summer Reading”

<http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/summer/research.htm>

Cooperative Summer Library Program’s “Summer Reading White Paper”

<http://tinyurl.com/qybrrcm>



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