10 things award-winning learning apps all do, and 5 none do

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We studied 949 award wins from 2021 to 2026. The winners share ten habits, from adaptive paths to teacher dashboards, and five gaps none of them fill.

We collected 949 award wins from 2021 to 2026, across 706 product names, and read what the repeat winners have in common. The list is drawn from the CODiE, EdTech Breakthrough, EdTech Digest and Tech & Learning winners, plus kids' awards like NAPPA and Mom's Choice. Many winners are close copies of each other, so the habits repeat. For the awards themselves, read the edtech awards list and the children's awards list. A caveat first: we read the products' public pages, help guides and reviews, and could not see inside most of them, so this is what the makers say and show.

Ten things they all do

1. An adaptive path. The product picks the next question from the last answer. IXL, MobyMax, Lexia, DreamBox and ST Math all work this way, though they differ in how.

2. A grown-up view. A dashboard for the teacher or parent says what the child did. It is the screen the buyer sees.

3. A reward loop. Stickers, coins, avatars or pets. Prodigy puts a math gate inside a monster-battle game; most others use lighter rewards.

4. A grade-by-grade map. IXL's home page is a wall of grade tiles with skill counts, for example 369 kindergarten math skills.

5. Standards labels. Pages name the standards they cover, because buyers search by standard.

6. A badge or number up front. Several lead with "200 billion questions answered", "58,000 schools" or an award logo before saying what a child does.

7. A sales door before a play door. Of eight front pages we opened, only PBS KIDS let a child start playing in one tap. The other seven opened with a sign-in, a trial or a demo request.

8. A rostering link. School products connect to a class list, often through ClassLink or Google, so a teacher does not type names.

9. A short free tier or trial. Consumer apps give a free taste and a subscription; school products give a quote.

10. Evidence the maker supplies. Most point to research or cite an ESSA tier. The effect sizes we found behind "Strong" ratings were small, about +0.04 to +0.16, and the studies are mostly

vendor-reported.

Five things none of them do

1. Work without a school or an account. Almost every product starts from a roster or a sign-in.
2. Explain the AI to a child. None gave a kid-readable account of how the AI works or what it keeps.
3. Write stories at the child's own reading level. Leveled libraries exist, but the stories are fixed.
4. Serve a pre-reader and a parent together. Early-learning apps are for the child alone.
5. Put science, code and reading together for ages 5 to 8. Each sits in a different product.

How to use this

- Ask what a child sees in the first minute. A front page full of numbers tells you about the buyer.
- Check who the dashboard is for. If only the teacher sees the data, ask what the child sees.
- Look for the evidence page. A real one names the study, its size and who ran it.

Where Peabody fits

Peabody (stories for kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up, and starts a child on a story in one tap, which the study found only one of eight products doing. It has won none of these awards. The gaps above are the list we work from; read the library and tell us which we have not closed.

Sources

- Winner lists from codieawards.com, EdTech Breakthrough and EdTech Digest releases, Tech & Learning and the kids' awards, read November 2026.
- Product public pages, help guides and reviews, as set out in our full study notes; front pages opened on 8 November 2026.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/10-things-award-winning-learning-apps-all-do