An AI reading app for kids, with no open chatbot

Peabody blog · Reading · updated 2026-10-18

In Peabody, AI writes and checks stories, and there is no chat with an AI. What the AI does, what plain code does instead, and why that split is safer for kids.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is an AI reading app for kids in which the AI writes and screens the stories, and a child never chats with it. An AI model writes short stories from the child's ideas, at their reading level, and AI screens check those stories for safety. Everything else, from measuring reading level and tracking words to math and Peabody's own friendly lines, is plain code. There's no open chat with an AI, and Peabody never records your child's voice. It's free through the end of 2026.

A lot of parents are wary of "AI for kids," and they're right to ask questions. This post lays out exactly where AI is used in Peabody and where it isn't.

Why no open chatbot?

A chatbot is the most obvious way to put AI in front of a child, and the hardest to make safe. An open conversation can go anywhere. It's hard to screen in advance, it can feel like a friend in ways that aren't healthy, and it invites a child to type personal things.

So Peabody doesn't have an open one. The idea box is one-shot: the child's ideas go in, a story comes out, and that's the end of the exchange. Peabody the mascot (each child picks one of three friends: Hoot the owl, Twinkle the star or Wiggle the bookworm) talks in short lines, but they're written ahead of time and picked by code. He can't be asked a question by typing to him, and he can't answer one.

Where Peabody uses AI

- Job: Writing a story from a child's ideas · Done by: AI (Claude Haiku, from Anthropic)
- Job: Screening a child's ideas before writing · Done by: Code, then an AI classifier, with a stronger model's second opinion before turning an idea away
- Job: Screening every finished story · Done by: Code checks, then an AI screen, with a stronger model's second opinion when it isn't a clear pass
- Job: Comprehension questions for a story · Done by: Written with the story by the AI, then checked
- Job: An occasional quality review of a family's stories · Done by: A stronger AI model, read only by that family's grown-ups

Every AI call is budgeted and counted against the child it was for, so Peabody stays affordable enough to be free.

Where Peabody uses plain code instead

- Job: Measuring a story's reading level · Done by: Code: published readability formulas, sentence length and word lists
- Job: Tracking which words are sticking · Done by: Code: cold warm-ups, three right days in a row
- Job: Choosing which words come back, and when · Done by: Code: a spaced schedule, missed words first
- Job: Peabody's lines, praise and jokes · Done by: Templates written ahead of time
- Job: Math problems and marking · Done by: Code, from a seed: no AI at all
- Job: Idea bubbles on the make page · Done by: A hand-written list of more than 670 ideas
- Job: Reading aloud · Done by: Your browser's built-in speech

Using code wherever it can do the job is cheaper, more predictable, and easier to check. A formula gives the same answer every time; a model might not.

What "AI reading" means for your child, day to day

A typical visit looks like this:

1. Open the library or make a story. The library has Peabody's own stories from Pre-K to 8th grade. Making a story takes a few taps.
2. A quick word warm-up, cold, before the story (skippable).
3. Read the story. Tap a new word to hear it. In the evening, an optional bedtime mode goes warm and dim.
4. A short word check and four to six questions (also skippable).
5. Read it to someone, in big type, if they made it.
6. Stop. The session ends with a clear finish, not an endless feed.

The AI is behind step 1. Everything else is designed to be simple, predictable and the same for every child.

Peabody never listens to your child read

Some reading apps use the microphone to hear a child read and score their fluency. Peabody doesn't: nothing is recorded, ever, and no reading is scored by ear. That means it can't measure how fluently your child reads, and we say so plainly. It also means there's no recording of your child's voice anywhere. A button in a few boxes turns speech into typed words: the browser's own speech recognizer is tried first, which in browsers like Chrome and Safari may send the sound to the browser maker to do that, and where it is missing a small speech model (Whisper) runs on the device instead. Peabody never records or receives audio. The best listener for a child reading aloud is a person in the room. See why your child reading aloud to you matters.

Is AI good for kids' reading?

It depends on the job. AI is very good at one thing reading practice has always needed: lots of fresh, interesting text at exactly the right level. A child who loves dragons can have a dragon story at a 2nd-grade level tonight, with the words they're working on inside it.

What AI isn't good at is being a teacher, a friend or a judge of a child. Peabody doesn't ask it to be any of those. It writes, it gets checked, and the rest is up to your child, you, and some carefully plain code.

Nothing about Peabody itself has been studied in a trial yet. What it's built on, like spreading practice over several days, comes from memory research, and we're careful to describe it that way. See a little every evening beats a Saturday cram.

Try it

Open peabody.kids and tap a book or Make my own story! No sign-up, no email. Each child can make up to three stories a day, free through the end of 2026.

Other free reading apps

Peabody is one choice among several good free ones. Best free reading apps for kids compares what is really free in October 2026, from listening apps to decodable books, using each app's own pages.

Questions parents ask

Does my child talk to an AI on Peabody?

No. For stories, a child gives ideas once and the AI writes it. Peabody the mascot's other lines are written ahead of time. Kids can send each other phrases from Peabody's own list ("Hi!", a reaction face) by tapping, never typing, and a grown-up can turn that off. The one place kids type to each other is the online co-op in the Dungeon Dweller game, where every line is screened first (no names, numbers, places, links or rude words get through) and a grown-up chooses who their child can type to.

Which AI model does Peabody use?

Stories are written by Claude Haiku, a model from Anthropic. Safety screens use Haiku with a stronger Claude model as a second opinion.

Does Peabody listen to my child read?

No. Peabody records nothing and never hears your child read, so it can't measure fluency; a grown-up listening can. The only microphone is a button that turns speech into typed words, and no sound reaches Peabody.

What does the AI know about my child?

Only what it needs to write a story: the ideas, the reading level, the practice words, the mood and the scariness ceiling. For a child without an account, that includes no name.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/ai-reading-app-for-kids