How AI-driven adaptive reading works for kids, without the hype

Peabody blog · Words and levels · updated 2026-10-05

What "adaptive" really means in a children's reading app: where AI writes the story, where plain code picks the level and tracks words, and what it can't do.

"Adaptive" reading means the material changes based on what a child actually does: the story's level, the words they practise and what comes up next. In Peabody (peabody.kids), AI writes the stories, but plain, predictable code decides the level and keeps track of the words. That split matters, and it's the most useful thing to understand about any AI reading app. It's free through the end of 2027.

This post explains, step by step, what is adaptive, what isn't, and what a grown-up should still do themselves.

Two jobs, two kinds of tool

Teaching a child to read with software involves two very different jobs:

1. Making something good to read. Fresh, funny, gentle stories that fit a child's own ideas. This is what AI is good at.
2. Deciding what fits and remembering what happened. Which level, which words, when to repeat. This needs to be the same answer every time, and checkable. That's ordinary code.

Peabody uses AI for the first job and code for the second. When a story is written, it is then measured in code, with readability formulas, sentence length and word lists. If it doesn't fit the level the child asked for, it isn't used. A child's level is never "decided" by a language model's opinion.

Step 1: a starting point, not a test

The first time a child makes a story, they tap the sentence they can read comfortably, from a handful that run from "I can see you." to something with long sentences and weather. Grown-ups can set it too. That's the starting level, and it's treated as a guess.

Peabody can also offer "Let's find your books", a game of five quick taps with no score at the end. Nothing here gives a child a number about themselves.

Step 2: the story is written at that level

The child picks a mood and a few idea bubbles. AI writes the story. For the youngest readers, the checks look at things that matter at that stage: words per sentence, words per page, sight words, whether the words can be sounded out, and repetition. Older stories are measured

with sentence and vocabulary measures, and every story gets a range, because on a short text any readability formula can wander by about a grade. You can read more in what reading level really means.

Step 3: a cold warm-up before every story

Before the story, a child sees a few practice words and says whether they can read them, with no hint. This is the part that makes practice specific to them. A word counts as sticking only after three right days in a row. A miss puts it back to practising, and missed words come back first.

That's an adaptive rule, but a transparent one. You can read it in one sentence, and so can your child's teacher. How Peabody tracks words has the details.

Step 4: quiet checks on whether the books fit

After a story there are a few questions, and Peabody keeps a record of how recent reads went. If the last few books were all too easy, or all too hard, it offers the five-tap check at the level next door. Nothing is announced and nothing is graded. If your child's reading says the level was wrong, the level moves.

Two honest limits here. These are taps, so a lucky guess can look like understanding, and that's why one right answer never counts on its own. And the evidence is about books and words, not about the child as a person.

What isn't adaptive

It's worth being plain about what stays fixed:

- The rules. Three right days, missed words first, and the measures for each story are the same for every child.
- Safety. Stories for young readers stay gentle. What a story may contain doesn't change because a child asked for something else.
- Comparison. Peabody never ranks a child against other children and gives no percentile.

What a grown-up still does

An adaptive app can't hear your child read, so it can't tell you about fluency or decoding. It isn't a diagnosis tool, and it doesn't produce a Lexile or any grade-norm comparison. It doesn't measure Lexile.

What it can do is show you the words and stories in plain language and suggest one thing to ask tonight. Ten minutes of reading aloud to you, with a few stumbles noted, still tells you more than any chart. Try a story from the free library a floor up and a floor down and see which sounds smoother.

Questions parents ask

What does adaptive learning mean for reading?

It means the reading material and practice change based on what a child does: which words they miss, whether recent books were too easy or too hard, and how they answer questions. The good versions use clear rules you can read, not a black box.

Does AI decide my child's reading level?

Not in Peabody. AI writes the stories. A child's starting point comes from their own tap, and the level of every story is measured in code. Later reading can move the level, through plain rules.

Can an AI reading app replace a teacher?

No. It can add practice and show you what to ask about, but it can't hear your child read or diagnose a learning difference. If you're worried, talk to your child's teacher.

Is Peabody free?

Yes, free through the end of 2027.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-ai-adaptive-reading-works