A little every evening beats a Saturday cram: what memory research says

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Spacing, recall with feedback, and why right-after-reading isn't the same as learned. What research supports about short daily reading practice, and what it doesn't.

Practice spread over several days is remembered better than the same amount of practice crammed into one sitting. That's the spacing effect, one of the most replicated findings in memory research, and small studies of children learning new words agree. Peabody (peabody.kids) is built on it: short daily stories, words that come back on later days, and a word only counted as sticking after three right days. It's free through the end of 2026. This post explains the research in plain words, including what it doesn't show.

Idea 1: spacing

Spread it out: a few minutes each evening sticks better than the same time crammed into Saturday. Decades of memory research show that practice spread over several days is remembered better than the same amount done in one sitting, and smaller studies of children learning new words find the same pattern.

Note the words "the same amount". The research compares equal practice, spread versus crammed. It isn't saying ten minutes is magic, or that skipping a week and doing double makes up for it.

What the child studies show is narrower than the adult ones: young children learning new words over two weeks rather than one day, and elementary students learning word meanings over spaced sessions rather than one, remembered more weeks later. The benefit is smaller for younger children and short delays. And a one-day gap seems to work about as well as longer ones in classroom studies, which is handy, because "tomorrow" is easy to plan around.

Idea 2: trying to remember, then seeing the answer

The second idea is called retrieval practice: trying to recall something first, then getting the answer right away, usually strengthens memory more than just looking at it again. It helps most when the attempt mostly succeeds and the feedback comes immediately.

This is how Peabody's warm-up works. Every session starts with a quick word warm-up: your child tries each word on their own first, then sees the answer right away. Practising recall with instant feedback is one of the most-studied ways to help learning last, so we keep the warm-up short and winnable.

An honest caveat: most retrieval research is with older students and adults. For young

children it works best when it's guided and they can succeed, and no study has tested it specifically for learning to read printed words in an app. We think it's a reasonable, low-risk idea, not a demonstrated effect for reading.

Idea 3: "right now" isn't the same as "learned"

A child's score at the end of a session, especially right after reading the same words, overstates what they'll remember on another day. Researchers call this the gap between performance (how you do now) and learning (what lasts).

The practical lesson: getting a word right, cold, on several separate days is a much better sign it has stuck than getting it right again and again in one sitting. Small studies of young children learning spoken words found that words they got right in more separate sessions were more likely to be remembered a month later.

That's why Peabody:

- counts only the cold warm-up before a story, never the check right after it;
- counts at most one read of a word per day;
- calls a word sticking only after three right days in a row, and sends it back to practising after a miss;
- says "You read 5 new words today", never "learned", on the results screen.

The number three is a judgement call, not a research finding: no study has tested a day-count rule for sight words. It's a sensible bar, and Peabody tells grown-ups so.

What the research doesn't show

It's easy to overclaim here, so let's be clear about the limits:

- Spacing hasn't been shown to raise overall reading ability. It helps remember specific practised items, like words. One study that rescheduled a first-grade reading program from two to four sessions a week found no difference.
- There's no ideal session length. The popular "minutes per year of age" rule has no research source. See how long should kids read each day?
- Nothing in Peabody itself has been tested yet. No study shows that a child's own story, a family audience and short daily practice together will make a difference. Each piece has some support; the combination is Peabody's bet.

Putting it into practice, with or without an app

1. Pick a few words or a short book. Small is the point.
2. Practise a few minutes most days, attached to something that already happens, like after dinner.
3. Start with a cold check. Before reading, ask your child to read or explain yesterday's

words.
4. Give the answer right away when they miss, then move on cheerfully.
5. Count a word as known only after it's right on three separate days.
6. Bring missed words back first the next day.

That's exactly what Peabody automates in its warm-up, so you don't have to keep the list. See how Peabody tracks the words your child knows.

Why Peabody pairs this with stories

Spacing explains why little and often works. It doesn't make it happen. For that, Peabody leans on what children want: a story made from their own ideas, at their level, and someone to read it to. Aaron's bet, from his own family, is that a child who wants to see their story and show it off will pull the family into a few minutes every evening. You can try it free, no sign-up.

Questions parents ask

Is daily reading better than reading once a week?

For remembering specific words, practice spread over several days is remembered better than the same amount in one sitting. That's well supported in memory research, with smaller studies of children agreeing. It hasn't been shown to raise overall reading ability on its own.

What is spaced repetition for kids?

Coming back to the same words or facts on several different days, with gaps that grow as they get easier. Peabody brings missed words back next time, newer words the next day, and sticking words about a week and then a month later.

Why does Peabody wait three days before counting a word?

Because getting a word right right after reading it shows short-term memory, not learning. Three right cold checks on separate days is a better sign the word has stuck. The exact number is a sensible bar, not a research finding.

Does Peabody have research behind it?

Peabody is built on well-studied ideas, mainly spacing and practising recall with feedback. Peabody itself hasn't been tested in a study, and we don't claim it improves reading scores.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/little-and-often-reading