Vocabulary practice for 1st grade: easy ways to grow words at home

Peabody blog · Words and levels · updated 2026-10-04

First graders learn most new words by listening and talking, and learn to read words on sight. Simple daily vocabulary practice for 1st grade, with and without an app.

First graders grow vocabulary in two ways at once: the words they understand grow mostly by listening and talking, and the words they can read grow through sight words and sounding out. Good vocabulary practice for 1st grade feeds both, a few minutes at a time, on lots of days. Peabody (peabody.kids) helps with the reading side: short stories made from your child's ideas, built around sight words, with a quick daily check of which words are sticking. It's free through the end of 2026.

This post is mostly about what you can do at home without any app. Peabody comes in at the end.

Why 1st grade vocabulary is a little different

A typical first grader understands far more words than they can read. They might know exactly what enormous or disappointed means when you say it, and still be working on reading said and because.

That gap is normal, and it shapes what helps:

- Spoken vocabulary (words they understand and use) grows mostly from conversation and from being read to, especially from books a bit above what they can read alone.
- Reading vocabulary (words they can read on the page) grows from sight-word practice, phonics at school, and lots of easy reading.

Both matter. A child who knows lots of words out loud has an easier time understanding what they read later.

Five minutes a day: listening and talking

These need no screen at all:

1. Read aloud a book that's above their reading level. Picture books and early chapter books are full of words kids won't meet in conversation. When you hit an interesting one, stop for a second: "Gigantic. That means really, really big. What's something gigantic?"
2. Pick a word of the day. Use it at breakfast, at pickup and at dinner. "That was a gigantic sandwich." Kids love catching you using it, and love using it back.
3. Ask them to act it out. "Show me tiptoe. Show me grumpy." Movement and faces make words stick in a playful way.

4. Talk about the story after reading. "Why do you think the bear was nervous?" A question that uses the word is practice for both of you.
5. Sort words. "Is a mouse tiny or enormous? Is a whale?" Opposites and comparisons are a great way to sharpen meaning.

Five minutes a day: reading words

For the words they read on the page:

1. Sight-word spotting. Pick one word, like said or was, and see how many times they can find it in a book.
2. Sticky notes. Put this week's three sight words on the fridge. Read them every time you pass.
3. Reread easy books. A book that's comfortable to read builds speed and confidence. Rereading a favourite is good practice, not cheating.
4. Let them read to you. Even one page. Pause for a few seconds before helping with a tricky word, then say it and let them reread the sentence.

For more ideas, see sight words practice in stories, not flashcards.

Why a little on many days beats a lot on one

It's tempting to save vocabulary for a big weekend session. The research points the other way: practice spread across several days is remembered better than the same amount crammed into one sitting, and smaller studies of children learning new words find the same pattern. A word of the day, used three or four times, on most days, is a better plan than twenty words on Saturday. More in a little every evening beats a Saturday cram.

How Peabody fits in

Peabody does the reading-words side, in a way first graders tend to enjoy:

- Your child picks a few ideas (a robot who wants to dance, a dinosaur at school, a pizza party) and a mood, and Peabody's AI writes a short story at their reading level.
- For Pre-K to 1st grade, stories are built around Dolch sight words: each target word appears at least twice, on pages of nine words or fewer, with short words they can sound out.
- A quick "I read it / Not yet" warm-up before each story, and a word only counts as sticking after three right days in a row. Missed words come back first.
- Every line Peabody says can be heard with the button, so a child who's still learning to read can use it with a grown-up nearby.

Each child can make up to three new stories a day. If your 1st grader reads beyond the early level, tapping a harder sentence switches them to stories with five vocabulary words each, the kind of words this post is mostly about. See vocabulary practice for 3rd grade for how those

work.

An honest note: Peabody can't hear your child read, and an early reader's "I read it" is their own tap. Listening to them read one page tells you more than any app can.

A 1st grade word list to play with

Here are some words first graders often enjoy talking about. Use them out loud; there's no need for your child to read them yet:

- Feelings: grumpy · Size and shape: gigantic · Movement: tiptoe · Sounds: crunch
- Feelings: nervous · Size and shape: tiny · Movement: wobble · Sounds: whisper
- Feelings: proud · Size and shape: enormous · Movement: scurry · Sounds: rumble
- Feelings: curious · Size and shape: narrow · Movement: tumble · Sounds: squeak
- Feelings: disappointed · Size and shape: round · Movement: stomp · Sounds: buzz

Pick one column a week. Act them out, find them in books, and use them at dinner.

Questions parents ask

How many vocabulary words should a 1st grader learn each week?

There isn't one right number, and schools vary. A few words a week, used often across many days, tends to stick better than a long list. Ask your child's teacher what they're working on in class.

What's the difference between sight words and vocabulary words?

Sight words are very common words, like the and said, that children learn to read instantly. Vocabulary words are words whose meaning is new, like enormous. First graders need both.

Is there a free vocabulary app for 1st grade?

Peabody is free through 31 December 2026 and needs no sign-up. For 1st grade and younger it practises sight words inside short stories your child helps make. Free stories for every level are in the library.

Should my 1st grader be reading on their own yet?

Many first graders read short, simple books on their own by the end of the year, and many need a grown-up beside them. Both are normal. If you're worried, talk to their teacher.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/vocabulary-practice-1st-grade