How to choose an AI learning tool for your child: a parent's guide

Peabody guide · updated 2026-10-18

A step-by-step guide to picking an AI learning tool for a child aged 4 to 12: what to decide first, seven questions to ask, red flags, and a one-week trial.

To choose an AI learning tool for your child, decide what you want it to do, check how it treats children's privacy and safety, find out what the AI is actually doing, try it with your child for one week, and keep it only if your child learns something and still wants to come back. That takes about an hour of your time, spread over a week. Peabody (peabody.kids), a free reading and learning app for kids, is built on these same ideas. It is free through the end of 2027. The steps below work for any tool.

There are now hundreds of apps with "AI" in the name. Most parents don't need the cleverest one. They need one that is safe, fits their child's age, and gets used.

Step 1: Decide the job before you look at the tool

Start with one sentence: "I want this to help my child _____." Good answers are specific:

- read a little every day
- practise sight words before school
- stop avoiding maths facts
- come up with stories of their own
- have something calm and useful for the car

A tool that tries to do everything usually does nothing well. If you can't finish the sentence, wait. A tool you pick for a clear job is easier to judge a week later.

Step 2: Check the safety basics first

Before anything else, look at how the tool treats a child. This is the step where it is easiest to rule a tool out.

- Ask: What does it collect about my child? · A good answer: As little as possible, and it says so in plain words · Be careful if: It asks for a full name, birthday, photo or school up front
- Ask: Is there advertising? · A good answer: No ads, and no selling or sharing data · Be careful if: Ads, "partners", or a vague "we may share"
- Ask: Can my child talk to strangers? · A good answer: No open chat; any chat is limited and controlled · Be careful if: Open text chat with other users
- Ask: What does the AI say to my child? · A good answer: Stories and answers are

filtered, gentle and age-fitted · Be careful if: The AI is a general chatbot with the same replies as for adults

• Ask: Can I see and control it? · A good answer: A grown-up view, with clear controls · Be careful if: No grown-up view at all

A few honest cautions. No tool can promise a child will never see something unsuitable. Absolute promises of perfect safety are marketing, not guarantees. Look for a description of what the tool does (filters, limits, what is stored) rather than a badge. The post on whether AI is safe for kids' learning goes deeper, and what happens when there's no account covers the privacy side.

Step 3: Find out what the AI actually does

"AI-powered" can mean very different things. Ask which of these the tool does:

1. Writes new content, such as stories or practice questions.
2. Chooses what comes next, such as which level or which words.
3. Talks with your child as a tutor or companion.
4. Checks your child's answers and gives feedback.

These carry different risks. Writing a story is low-stakes: if it's not great, you read another. Choosing a level or judging an answer matters more, because a wrong call could leave a child bored or stuck. Talking freely with a child is the highest-stakes of all.

Prefer tools where the important decisions (the level, what counts as right, when a word comes back) follow rules you can read in a sentence. Treat "our AI figures it out" as a reason to ask more. For a worked example, see how AI-driven adaptive reading works.

Step 4: Match it to your child's age and stage

Rough guides, not rules:

• Ages 3 to 5: Short, repeating, read-aloud. A grown-up beside them. Very few words per page. No typing.

• Ages 5 to 7: Early reading and number sense. Tap-to-answer, not typing. Sessions of five to ten minutes.

• Ages 8 to 10: Longer stories, word meanings, times tables. Some choice and some creating.

• Ages 11 and up: More independence, more reading of their own, but still worth a look at what they use.

If your child can't use it without you every time, it may be too hard. If they finish in a minute, it may be too easy. A good tool lets you move a level up or down.

Step 5: Look at the cost, including the long run

Free is lovely, but ask what happens later. Is it free for a set time, free with ads, or free for a while and then a subscription? Check the date and the plan. Peabody is free through the end of 2027, and says so; you can make a free story to see how it feels. Read the terms for anything that renews automatically, and avoid giving a card for a "free trial" you don't mean to keep.

Step 6: Run a one-week trial

Give the tool one week, ten minutes a day at most. Sit with your child for the first two days. Then ask the following at the end of the week:

1. Did they use it without a fight? Not every day, but mostly.
2. Did they do something real? Read words, made a story, solved problems, not just tapped.
3. Could they tell you something they learned or made? Ask them.
4. Did it fit the level? They should stumble on a little and manage most of it.
5. Did you feel fine about what they saw? Check the history or the grown-up view.
6. Did it end? A natural stopping point is a good sign.

If you can answer yes to most of these, keep it. If not, drop it without guilt. Plenty of good paper books and bedtime reading do the same job.

Step 7: Keep a human in the loop

An AI learning tool is extra practice. It can't hear your child read, can't diagnose a learning difference, and can't replace a teacher. Talk to your child's teacher about what you're using, and ask if there's anything they'd like your child to practise. If a tool claims to diagnose dyslexia or "find your child's learning gaps" in general, be wary.

Red flags in one list

- Promises of results, grades or test scores
- Ranking or comparing your child with other children
- Streaks, countdown timers and guilt notifications
- Open chat with strangers
- Collecting a child's full name, photo or school
- Auto-renewing "free trials"
- No way to see what your child did
- "Our AI decides" with no description of how

Learn more elsewhere

- Common Sense AI risk assessments: independent tests of the chatbots and AI products kids actually use.
- Common Sense privacy evaluations: privacy scores for kids' apps and edtech.
- Common Sense: AI chatbots and your child, by age: no chatbots at 5 and under, limited use beside a grown-up from 6 to 12, supervised use for homework from 13.

For about seventy more, checked and sorted by who they're for, see where to learn about AI.

Questions parents ask

How do I know if an AI learning tool is safe for my child?

Look at what it collects, whether it shows ads, whether children can talk to strangers, and whether you can see what your child did. Choose tools that explain these in plain words. No tool can promise a child will never see anything unsuitable, so stay nearby, especially at first.

What age is right for an AI learning tool?

There is no single age. Many children enjoy a read-along story with a grown-up from about 4 or 5. Younger children are better with books and conversation. Judge by how your child responds, not by the number on the box.

Are free AI learning tools any good?

Some are very good (try a few free stories and see). Check how long they stay free and what they ask for in return: data, ads or a later subscription. Peabody is free through the end of 2027, with no ads and no account needed for a child to read.

Should my child use an AI tutor?

A tutor that chats freely with a child needs the most care. A tool that gives structured practice and short stories is a lower-risk place to begin. Whichever you choose, try it together first.

How much time a day is enough?

For most children, five to fifteen minutes of learning on a screen is plenty, ideally alongside paper books and reading aloud.

Free at peabody.kids/guides/how-to-choose-an-ai-learning-tool-for-your-child