Talking Buttons That Allow Your Dog to 'Speak'

We know that dogs and other animals can understand the words we say, but we just can't converse back and forth. That may soon change with this new AIC device with customizable talking buttons and tiles, which has already catapulted one dog, Bunny, to fame on social media.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Talking dog buttons are a form of augmentative interspecies communication (AIC) devices, which aim to help nonhuman animals communicate in language-like ways

- They involve sound boards with buttons, each of which plays a word, such as "outside," "food" or "play," when pressed

- One dog, Bunny, has become famous on social media for using an AIC device developed by FluentPet

- The system groups hexagon-shaped tiles with buttons into categories, such as places, social words such as greetings, action words and descriptors, such as adjectives

- Most dogs can be taught how to successfully use the buttons to communicate their wants, needs and even more complex thoughts — like "love you" — to their owners

At some point or another, most pet guardians wish they could understand what their dog is thinking. But while you can get in-tune with your dog by learning to read their body language, there's no denying that teaching dogs to "talk" would bring interspecies communication to another level entirely.

This might not be as far off as it sounds, as talking dog buttons are now available — and virtually anyone can teach their dog, and possibly their cat, how to use them.

Talking Dog Buttons Help Dogs 'Talk'

Talking dog buttons are a form of augmentative interspecies communication (AIC) devices, which aim to help nonhuman animals communicate in language-like ways.[1] They involve sound boards with buttons, each of which plays a word, such as "outside," "food" or "play," when pressed.

One dog, Bunny, has become famous on social media for using an AIC device developed by FluentPet.[2] The company explains:[3]

> *"We've known for millennia that our dogs and other animals can understand the words we say. With FluentPet customizable talking buttons and specially designed tiles to hold and organize buttons by word category, they can say words too.*

The FluentPet System combines ideas from speech language pathology and cognitive science to design arrangements that help you and your dog (or other 'learner,' as we call them) communicate and remember word locations."

The system groups hexagon-shaped tiles with buttons into categories, such as places, social words such as greetings, action words and descriptors, such as adjectives. Alexis Devine, Bunny's guardian, told PetMD "the keys to success are patience, repetition, and the ability to really listen to what your animal companion is saying, including all the things they're already saying without words."[4]

She explained that most dogs can be taught how to successfully use the buttons to communicate their wants, needs and even more complex thoughts — like "love you" — to their owners. "Using basic operant conditioning to teach a button like 'Outside' is very easy,"[5] she told PetMD, adding that the word "play" is also simple.

"One would press the 'Play' button, then begin playing with the dog and repeat the process until the dog is understanding that the two are linked."[6] Examples of categories and common words you may teach your dog include:[7]

- **Subjects —** Certain people and cats or dogs in your home
- **Objects —** Toy, water, food
- **Places —** Walk, couch, bed, outside, kennel
- **Actions —** Potty, look, settle, come, play, help
- **Descriptors —** More, good, now, mad, all done, later
- **Social —** Where, bye, want, love you, hi, yes

Ten Words Most Dogs Understand

While the idea of teaching dogs how to use buttons to communicate with us is still a novel one, dogs have long been known to understand extensive human language. The extent that they understand it remains largely unknown, but reports of "genius" dogs aren't unheard of.

Among them is a border collie named Chaser who learned and retained the names of 1,022 objects over a three-year period, as well as acquired referential understanding of nouns, which is something children learn to do.[8]

While knowing over 1,000 words is unusual for the average dog, a study involving 165 dog owners[9] found that dogs responded to a mean of 89 words, with a range of 15 to 215 words for individual dogs.[10] Of the 89 words, 78 of them were from the provided lists while 11 were words that were added by the owners. Half of the words were commands (verbs), but dogs also responded to nouns and general words.

Many of the dogs in this study were owned by certified dog trainers, and many of the dogs participated in specialized professions or competitive sports. Differences were found among highly trained dogs and typical pet dogs, with professionally trained dogs understanding nearly 1.5 more words than dogs with no formal training or basic obedience training only.[11]

Regardless of training history, age or breed, however, more than 90% of the dogs in the study recognized the following 10 words and phrases:[12]

- Dog's name

- Sit

- Come

- Good girl/boy

- Down

- Stay

- Wait

- No

- OK

- Leave it

How to Teach Your Dog to Use Word Buttons

If you want to try the button method to teach your dog to communicate with words, there are many varieties available on the market. FluentPet recommends the following steps to help your dog learn this new skill:[13]

- **Choose your words —** You may choose words your dog already knows, such as outside, play and cuddle. Then, repeat it multiple times while modeling the meaning. "For example, to model 'play', when you're about to play with your learner, say 'Do you want to play? Ok let's play! Play play play!,'" FluentPet explains.[14]

- **Model the word —** After choosing your words and recording them on the button, say the word, press the button and then direct your dog to the object (such as 'ball') or engage in the action that the word describes.

- **Be persistent and patient —** Continue to consistently repeat the teaching process until your dog understands. "This will be the first stage of learning for your dog or cat and it can take some time. Don't get discouraged," FluentPet says.[15]

Sources and References

[1] TheyCanTalk.org, Research

[2, 4, 5, 6] PetMD January 10, 2023

[3, 7] FluentPet Science & Design

[8] Behavioural Processes February 2011, Volume 86, Issue 2, Pages 184-195

[9, 10, 11] Applied Animal Behaviour Science January 2022, Volume 246, 105513

[12] Science Alert December 10, 2021

[13, 14, 15] FluentPet Steps to Start Teaching With Buttons