

Starter Guide



FluentPet

Introduction to Button Communication

If you've ever wondered what your dog or cat was thinking, they might be wondering the same right back at you.





So what is button communication?

Through pressing buttons of pre-programmed speech sounds or words, animal learners can share their requests, thoughts, and feelings. With time and patience, learners have been incredibly successful. Some have not only been able to communicate needs and wants, but also seem to relay more abstract concepts such as feelings or time.

But can I teach them to talk?

Yes! Remember that believing in your learner's potential is the first step. Our curriculum will guide you through the rest. While the idea may sound daunting, anyone and any learner is capable (though our fish friends might have a harder time).

Terminology

A learner is any non-human individual you are teaching (or going to teach) how to use button communication.

The word/phrase is the sound produced by the button when it's pressed, and the meaning concept is your actual definition of the word. We use CAPITALIZED LETTERS in our curriculum to specify the meaning or concept.

For example, you may have the word "Baño", which is the concept BATHROOM.



Table of Contents

Stage 1: Preparation

Preparing Your Learner

5

Stage 2: Getting Started

Your buttons are here! Now what?

10

Stage 3: Patience

Patience and Persistence

16

Stage 4: Growth

Growing Vocabulary

20

FAQs

23



Preparing your Learner

Even before you get your buttons, you can start with the following.



Get to know your learner

You're probably already familiar with your learner's quirks. Maybe they expect-or demand-walks after dinner by waiting at the door, or they wake you up at 5 AM for sleepy cuddles.

Maybe you know that saying PARK will get your learner overexcited, so you've started spelling P-A-R-K out loud instead. They already recognize the words you speak the most. These are the words you'll likely start with for button teaching.

Armed with this knowledge:

- Pay attention to the words or phrases that are frequently used and highly motivating to your learner.
- Jot down the words you notice yourself using often so you can refer to them later.
- Honor your learner's current communicative behavior. If you notice your learner trying to tell you something through whining, pawing, sitting, or looking at you, try responding to them! You don't have to give in to their requests for treats, but they're trying to get your attention, so get in the habit of acknowledging and honoring their "language." This builds mutual trust and good communication habits.



Involve others in speaking regularly to your learner

While you might speak the most to your learner, try to get everyone else to participate too. Why do we do this? Our learners are like babies before the babbling stage. They're absorbing word sounds and combinations.

Be consistent with quality input, or quality language, by:

A) Using learner-directed speech

- Speak often to your learner **simply, clearly, and enthusiastically**.
- Be consistent with word choice.
- Repeat the key word/phrase 4-5 times per interaction. The key word is the high-frequency and motivating word.
- Try to preserve your regular spoken syntax, but do simplify your sentences.
- Engage your learner! For example: "Do you want to go OUTSIDE? Let's go OUTSIDE. We go OUTSIDE? Yes, OUTSIDE."

B) Practicing timeliness

Follow up with the object, action, or event word in a timely manner. If you say "Let's go OUTSIDE," try to not let too much time pass before you head out the door. This helps your learner associate the word with a specific object or event. You don't have to give in to their requests for treats, but they're trying to get your attention, so get in the habit of acknowledging and honoring their "language." This builds mutual trust and good communication habits.



Brainstorm where to set up buttons

Some learners absorb best when buttons are near the object or interaction they associate it with. Others find it easier when buttons are in one consolidated location.

Start brainstorming locations in the house that are easily accessible and where you and your family spend a lot of time. You might also start with an OUTSIDE button by the door or a WATER button by the water bowl.

Keep in mind that if more buttons are added later, moving them around or putting them together can cause setbacks for your learner. However, moving them may sometimes be unavoidable, so don't worry—our learners are typically resilient and will bounce back, but it takes time and patience.



Many of our learners did not practice target training and remained successful. As a result, we recommend target training for learners who struggle with precision or are reluctant to interact with buttons.



Target Training

Many of our learners did not practice target training and remained successful. As a result, we recommend target training for learners who struggle with precision or are reluctant to interact with buttons.

What is target training?

Target training is teaching your learner to touch a predetermined object. It can be helpful in teaching your learner that the buttons are important to pay attention to.

How can I start target training?

For target training, you reward hitting the target with a treat. Start by training your learner to place their nose, paw, or claw on a nonsense sound button, small yogurt lid, or sticky note.

Avoid using actual word buttons when target training, unless you can follow through with the button's meaning. Your soundboard buttons should be rewarded with only the associated event or object. So if your learner presses “outside,” they get to go outside, and when they press “play,” they get to play with you.



To get started with target training, check out this tutorial video here.



Your buttons are here! Now what?

Even before you get your buttons,
you can start with the following.



Set up your buttons as planned

Consider when setting up your buttons:

- In the case of expansion, how will you add new buttons?
- Are the buttons easily accessible to me and my learner? Ideally, you and your learner should be able to access them quickly and easily in order to encourage modeling. Some families have found success with placing the buttons in the living room or by the kitchen, since they spend a lot of time there.
- Will putting buttons against a wall prevent my learner from looking at me when using them?
- Does your learner have larger paws or trouble with accuracy? If so, they might need more space between buttons or larger tiles. Some learners may lose progress if their setups significantly shift. Will my setup require changes later and if so, am I prepared for any setbacks?
- All of the above are only suggestions as everyone's home and learner looks different.



Finish choosing words

By now, you should have an idea of what words are motivating, interesting, and frequently used when you're with your learner.



If you see them looking at the buttons, standing near the buttons, or pawing at the buttons, get excited! Give them praise and attention (but no treats) for showing interest.

Try choosing words that your learner wants to communicate to you.

Start off with 1 - 3 buttons. Some learners actually understand faster when you have more than one button. Providing more avenues of communication can be motivating!

Introducing “opposite” or differing concepts together may help your learner differentiate between words (For example: food/water, play/all done).

BALL on its own could be misinterpreted as just any toy. But by comparing it to another toy, such as BONE, it makes the traits of BONE distinct from BALL to your learner.

Possibly add ALL-DONE, FINISHED, or LATER if your learner is too enthusiastic about something.

Consider keeping the buttons physically together.

Some concepts to consider starting with:

- OUTSIDE
- PLAY / ALL DONE
- TOY
- WATER / FOOD*
- LOVE YOU / HELP

Tip

Avoid starting with a “food” button if your learner is overly food motivated. They may associate the buttons as a way to get food rather than a communicative tool if that is their first button.



Your learner is finally starting their journey!

Here are some key tips:

Tip 1: Every learner is unique.

You know your learner best! Some of these tips and hints might not work for you. Your learner will have his/her own pace and own style of communication. Avoid comparing your learner with the other dogs and cats out there who are using buttons as well.

Tip 2: Motivation matters more than you think!

Behavior driven by internal satisfaction is called intrinsic motivation. The desire to do the task comes from within. Extrinsic motivation means behavior driven by the desire for external rewards or incentives, such as treats.

Help your learner maintain intrinsic motivation.

When you communicate with your friends and family, you usually aren't speaking to them with the hope of getting a reward. Unless you're requesting free ice cream. Part of the joy of being able to communicate is getting to tell someone what you want or need.

They will communicate to you when they find it meaningful.

Let your learner explore. Using the buttons itself should be rewarding, so don't lure them with treats. They'll tell you what they need when they need it.

Tip 3: Celebrate small successes to encourage them.

Your learner might ignore the buttons for the first few weeks. Some of the most famous button-using learners took weeks to begin acknowledging their buttons.

So just try rewarding small successes. If you see them looking at the buttons, standing near the buttons, or pawing at the buttons, get excited! Give them praise and attention (but no treats) for showing interest. When your learner starts paying attention to the buttons in the right context, that means they might be ready to start using them soon.



Your learner is finally starting their journey!

Tip 4: Prompt casually.

If they're trying to communicate with you by looking, whining, or pawing, you can walk over and stand near the buttons. Give them time to respond (count slowly to 10 before doing anything else). If you decide you need to prompt more, use natural behaviors such as pointing or tapping near the buttons. If they don't react after 10+ seconds, go ahead and demonstrate the button use and continue the activity.

Try not to ask them if they want something specific ("do you want to go outside?") even if you think you know what they want. Instead, you can say "use your words" to remind them.



DON'T reward with a treat unless the button represents "treat."

We recommend avoiding treat rewards (check Tip 2 for why).

DON'T overprompt.

If you find yourself trying to get them to come over or if you're trying to get their attention again and again, you might be over-prompting. This might backfire and end up making your learner less interested in the buttons. Instead, wait for your learner to show interest for a slow count to 10 before modeling the buttons yourself.

DON'T force your learner to press the button.

This can be very harmful. Imagine being forced to give a speech when you're not ready. Communication should always be up to your learner. Instead, model the words verbally and by using the buttons yourself at appropriate times.

Many of our learners did not practice target training and remained successful. As a result, we recommend target training for learners who struggle with precision or are reluctant to interact with buttons.



Always model, model, model!

No, not runway modeling. Modeling in a button-teaching context refers to being a role model for button usage, as well as observing and imitating.

Whenever you say a high-frequency word, press the corresponding button then follow through. Repetition and consistency is important, so do this whenever you use the appropriate word.

For example, if your learner is standing by the door, looking at you intently because they know it's walk time, you might say "Buddy, yes, let's go to the PARK. PARK? Now PARK?"

Next, you can press the PARK button. "We go to the PARK."

Then, you get their leash and head to the park. Next time you go to the park, you would repeat this process.

Tip 5: Use the same word in multiple appropriate contexts.

If your other family members take your learner outside, try to have them use OUTSIDE as well. If you are going through the front door instead of the back door, still model OUTSIDE. If you're taking them to the park, model OUTSIDE before you go.

Tip 6: A quiet and calm environment can help your learner focus.

Your learner might be too distracted in a busy and crowded room to investigate the buttons. It might help to turn off the TV or put away their toys.



Patience and Persistence

Even before you get your buttons, you can start with the following.



Model with consistency

Stay consistent, clear, and enthusiastic with your modeling. Use the buttons in any appropriate context and have friends and family join in!

Remember to combine verbal language with button usage when you do speak to your learner.

Tip 7: Random button pressing is a good teaching opportunity

Even if they press buttons on accident, react to them. Random button-pressing is often a “babbling” stage in their learning process, so this is a good opportunity to reinforce word meanings.

For example, if they accidentally walk onto the PLAY button, you can grab a nearby toy and ask, “Did you want to PLAY? Want to PLAY?” Then, press PLAY again and play with them.

Tip 8: Don't jump in to correct or demonstrate immediately.

Give your learner a chance to try and fail before modeling for them again.



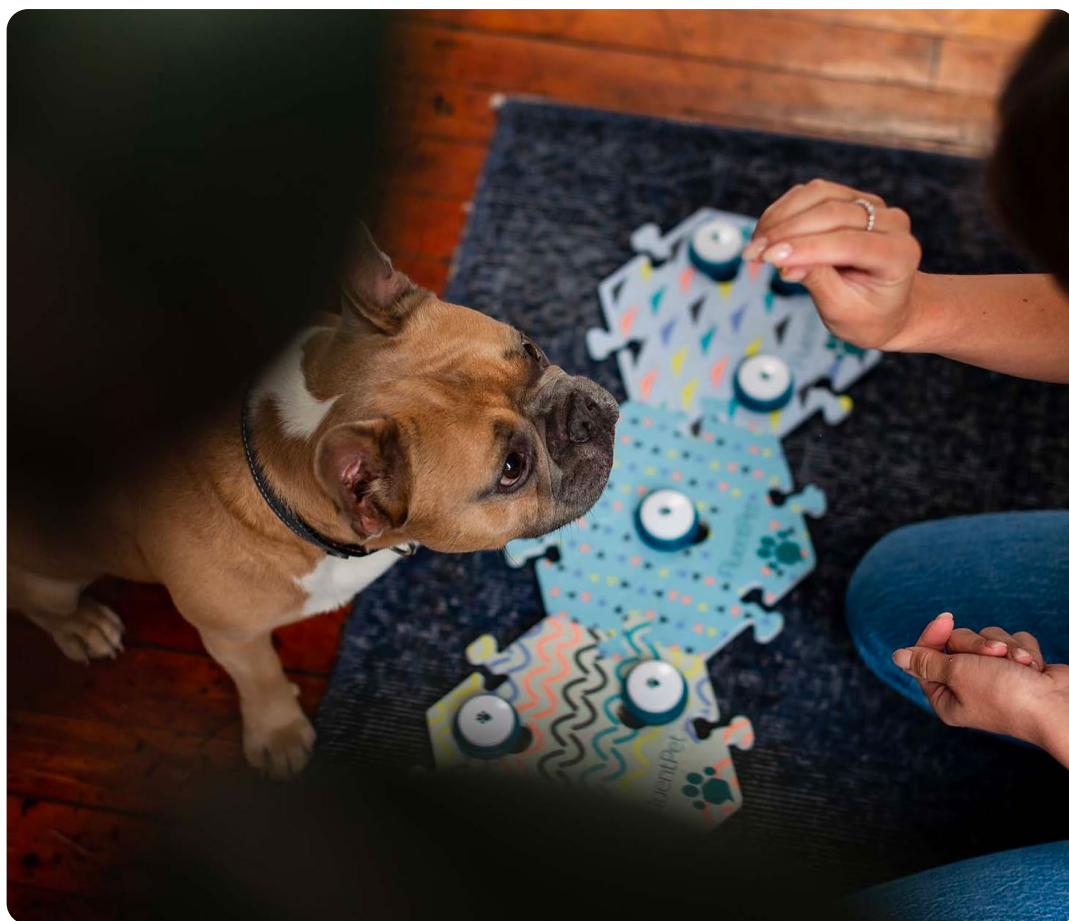
Everyone needs time to think. If your learner is starting to look at the buttons in the right context, waiting at least 10 seconds can give them the time they need to respond.

Tip 9: Don't automatically fill in the empty silences.

Everyone needs time to think. If your learner is starting to look at the buttons in the right context, waiting at least 10 seconds can give them the time they need to respond. Our research team has seen learners taking upwards of 40 seconds to answer. If nothing happens, don't worry, just model again.



Modeling one step up



Once your learner seems to pay attention to your language, you can model one step up.

What does modeling “one step up” mean?

If they’re using one word button at a time, use one or two word buttons when you model. When your learner is using two different buttons in sequence, then you can go up to three words.

For example, if your learner is regularly using their OUTSIDE button, you might say (and press) “Buddy, WANT OUTSIDE? WANT OUTSIDE?” instead of just “OUTSIDE.”

Add new words if you think your learner is ready to move forward. The more exposure your learner gets to new words, the more they learn. Read Stage 3 about progression and vocabulary growth for specific strategies.

Everyone needs time to think. If your learner is starting to look at the buttons in the right context, waiting at least 10 seconds can give them the time they need to respond.



Have faith and be patient

Have faith in your learner! When learning any new language, the first stage is observing and absorbing. This language observation and listening stage takes time. Don't be intimidated by what you see online.

Tip 10: If you have a multi-learner household (more than one button user), add words at the pace of the fastest learner.

Every learner is different, and you may notice some of your learners are more interested in the buttons than others. This is common; it takes different amounts of time for each learner.

We recommend adding words at the pace of the fastest learner and be reassured that, even if it doesn't seem like it, the others are paying attention in the background. In fact, your learners might even pick up button usage from each other!

Tip 11: It's normal for your learner to cycle through talkative and quiet periods.

New events, people, and locations can all cause changes in your learner's button behavior. Learners usually bounce back, but let them take their time and keep supporting them with modeling.

If you notice your learner avoiding the buttons or becoming uncharacteristically quiet, check if their physical needs are being met first. Do they seem safe, comfortable, and healthy?



Growing Vocabulary

Even before you get your buttons, you can start with the following.





If your learner has started using one word for multiple meanings or if they have started combining words, it might mean they need more accurate words. Try to maintain having one or two more words than what your learner currently uses.

Observing and investigating

Observing and investigating refers to watching you as a teacher model, as well as tip-toeing around the board and exploring what it does.

Requesting often

Requesting often starts with an “ask,” whether for a toy, attention, or an activity. At this stage, your learner is interested in getting what they want through a button press.

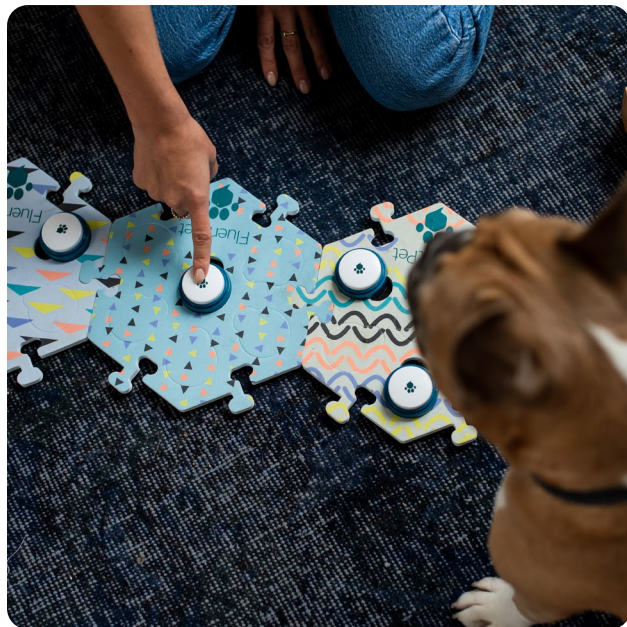
Mapping

Mapping is when your learner starts to realize that the meanings of the buttons persist, and map to their definition, regardless of where they are physically located.

Commenting and abstracting

Commenting and abstracting are higher level communication skills. Your learner may start to narrate, describe, or comment on what they do or what you do. They may seem to be abstracting or attempting to communicate concepts such as love, time, or emotions.





How can you help your learner advance?

Below we've compiled answers on how to add new words and what words to add.

WHEN DO I ADD NEW WORDS?

Add words when you seem to need more words as long as your learner understands:

- How to press buttons
- That pressing a button = something happens (like "OUTSIDE" = going outside)
- The meaning of the buttons they already have

If your learner has started using one word for multiple meanings or if they have started combining words, it might mean they need more accurate words. Try to maintain having one or two more words than what your learner currently uses.

WHAT NEW WORDS SHOULD I ADD?

Add new words for your learner that are relevant in many different settings and activities.

Core words are words that make up to 70 - 90% of our daily vocabulary, typically prepositions, verbs, and adjectives.

Some examples might be "more," "want," or "my/mine." As humans, we know thousands of words, but we don't need all of them in our daily life. The same goes for our learners.

However, that's not to say you shouldn't add "fringe" vocabulary words too! Fringe words are more specific words that are lower frequency. They're often nouns or pronouns. If you notice that your learner has been interacting with a specific toy or liking a certain activity, try adding that word.

WHERE SHOULD I ADD NEW WORDS?

Some of our learners find it easier to keep similar categories of words together. For example, placing people, places, and actions in their own word groups. Adding new words to your current board without rearranging all of the buttons will make your learner's transition easier.

FluentPet uses compact buttons seated in a hexagonal tile grid, which makes word locations easier to learn and remember. It also helps learners efficiently reach the most words possible. Through combined ideas from speech language pathology and cognitive science, we've found that the hexagonal arrangement is a great way to grow without compromising button-pressing and learning.

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR LEARNER'S PROGRESS.

We recommend either keeping your own notes to track your learner's development or to use our FluentPet app (coming soon). Tracking developmental progress is a great way to keep an eye on overall learning trends. You may also even start getting ideas for what new words to add.

You can use the TheyCanTalk button progress assessment to identify what stage your learner is at. Whether they're just starting out with investigating and requesting, or if they've progressed into commentary or more conversational button-pressing, you can get a good idea of how to proceed with their growth.



Frequently Asked Questions

If you have other questions or issues, please contact us.



What to do if your learner is nervous or hesitant about buttons?

Dogs are very aware of "spatial pressure," which refers to using the proximity and movement of our bodies to "push" or guide toward a certain behavior. Your learner might be nervous if you're leaning over them or the buttons while they explore the soundboard, so try taking a few steps back.

Other tips for nervous learners include letting them get used to a blank button or even one that you've taken the batteries out of. Never force your learner to use the buttons. You can always show that they're safe to play with by modeling their use, sitting near them, or even playing with them yourself!

What do I do if my learner is too enthusiastic (digging at the buttons, biting them, pressing a lot during work calls, etc.)?

If your learner is really rough with your buttons, you can work on a combination of target training and redirection. When target training for this reason, make sure you're only rewarding appropriate button presses (so they don't get a reward for throwing the button around or biting it, only for pressing it with their paw or nose in a semi-gentle manner).

If your learner starts to be too rough with the buttons, step in and redirect them to an appropriate toy/behavior and make sure to model that, too. You want to make sure they still want to use the buttons, so try not to jump in and redirect them away from the buttons too early.

An example: Your learner goes over to sniff the board. Keep an eye on them, but leave them to it. But when they start digging roughly at the board, go over, get their attention, press "PLAY" and then hand them an appropriate chew toy (or maybe play tug).

If your learner is just super enthusiastic and pressing lots of buttons, don't take their buttons away! Add an "ALL-DONE," "LATER," or similar button and use that to enforce boundaries. If your learner is trying to bug you, tell them they're all done or that you'll interact with them later (you can always model verbally, though modeling with buttons is even better).

What do I do if my learner was doing well but then stopped using buttons?

Be patient and continue modeling.

Changes such as moving your soundboard, consolidating buttons, or learners getting sick/injured can slow down your learner's progress or even take it backwards. Every learner is different, and while some may take a few days to bounce back, others may take weeks.



Even if you haven't made any recent changes, it's okay. These things go in cycles with many learners going through quiet periods and then starting to talk again.

Keep paying attention to body language cues or other forms of communication. Give your learner a chance to use their buttons (do a slow count to 10), but then go ahead and model the buttons and continue on with the activity.

How do I handle multiple learners / one learner seems to dominate the soundboard?

It seems like every learner goes at a different pace. This means that in multi-learner households, you'll generally have at least one learner who is faster than another. The general consensus is that you don't want to hold back your fastest learner. So add words at the pace of your fastest learner.

If one of your other learners seems to be frustrated by too many buttons, you can always create a second, smaller soundboard to the side for that learner.

If you have one learner who is pushy or protective of the buttons, you might also want to create separate boards for your learners or you can try to make sure that the other learners get time alone with you and the soundboard without your pushier learner around.

What if I didn't hear or understand a button press?

First, go ahead and respond as well as you can based on what you did hear. Pay attention to your learner's response: do they act confused or refuse to respond? You may have gotten it wrong. Do they happily go towards the thing? That may have been it.

You can also ask your learner to repeat ("say that again?") and, if they do, respond to those new presses. If they don't or aren't interested, respond as well as you can to the first press and pay attention to your learner's response.

If it's a common problem, it might be worth it to consider getting a camera. Depending on what camera you get, you can then go back and check what was pressed (as well as other context clues and details you may have missed the first time).



