

Do dog 'talking buttons' actually work? Does my dog understand me? Here's what the science says

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Is your dog bothered by something but you can't work out what? Do you wish they could tell you?

There's a [huge range](#) of dog "talking" buttons on the market that now claim to let your dog do this. A very basic kit will set you back about \$15, while more sophisticated ones can cost hundreds of dollars.

But is there any evidence these products work?

How the buttons work

The idea behind these buttons is simple. You record yourself speaking a word such as "treat" or "outside" into each button, after which the word is played back each time the button is pressed. Your dog can supposedly be trained to understand the words coming from the buttons, and use them to communicate with you.

Talking buttons are an example of [augmentative and alternative communication](#). To put it simply, they're a method of communication that doesn't use speech. In humans, similar devices are valuable for people with autism or intellectual disability, or those suffering from a stroke or other neurological condition.

Can dogs learn complex communication?

A dog [could figure out](#) to press talking buttons through a process called [operant conditioning](#)—the same process used to teach dogs simple commands such as "sit." When a dog performs a behavior and receives something they want, such as a treat, they're more likely to continue that behavior.

The idea of dogs "talking" to humans with buttons was started by

Christina Hunger, a speech language pathologist who understood the use of augmentative and alternative communication devices. Hunger claims to have taught her dog Stella more than 50 words and phrases [up to five-words long](#).

Understanding [human language](#) is too complex a task for a dog. Sometimes it may seem like dogs can very perform complex tasks—[such as driving a car](#)—when they link simple behaviors learned through operant conditioning. But they've just learned simple behaviors that are linked together—they haven't learned how to drive.

Alternative explanations

There are simple explanations for what may seem like complex behavior in animals. For one thing, animals excel in picking up our body language. As a result, they may appear to understand more than they actually do.

[Clever Hans the horse](#) is the perfect example. Hans [gained prominence](#) in the early 1900s for allegedly being able to do mathematics. Even his trainer believed he could count. It was only when the trainer was no longer present that people realized Hans was relying on involuntary cues in the trainer's body language to "solve" problems, and couldn't actually count.

Dogs are probably even better than horses at picking up on our body language cues. As the first [domesticated species](#), they've spent thousands of years working out what we're likely to do next. Just think of all the times your dog has rushed to the door even before you've picked up their leash.

When we train dogs to use talking buttons, they're probably learning using operant conditioning to some extent. For example, they learn that pressing a button can lead to a reward.

But in cases where dogs seem to be able to string multiple buttons together to say something advanced, or where they can press the "right" button when asked, they're likely just responding to their owner's body language. And they probably wouldn't be able to replicate the behavior if a new pet-sitter was making the command.

We need more data

Federico Rossan, director of the Comparative Cognition Lab at UC San Diego, is working on a [large project analyzing results](#) from dogs using talking buttons.

Although [FluentPet](#) (a business that sells pet communication products) is involved, the study is reported to be independent. That means a person who doesn't have a conflict of interest will analyze and report the results.

Data collection started in late 2020, but so far no evidence has been published. Until then, the best "evidence" we have for these products is anecdotal reporting coming from dog owners who are probably biased (since they'd like to think their dog is very clever).

Could it do any harm?

It matters when we treat our dogs differently depending on what *we* think *they* are thinking.

One example is when we assume dogs feel guilty for certain actions. For instance, when you come home and your dog has chewed up your favorite rug, they might look "guilty" as you scold them, but they're actually just responding to your reaction. Studies have shown dogs can't experience the [human emotion of guilt](#).

That's why you shouldn't punish your dog when you come home to a chewed-up carpet. They won't associate your yelling or smacking with their action from hours earlier.

The reality is some dogs will simply be more interested in interacting with talking buttons than others. There's no good reason to think these dogs are therefore smarter than others.

Should I buy talking buttons?

If you can recognize and account for the potential risks mentioned above, then buying talking buttons won't do any harm to you or your dog (apart from putting a dent in your wallet).

That said, there are myriad ways to communicate with your dog without needing such a device. Chaser the border collie learned how to retrieve 1,022 toys by name without [an augmentative device](#).

However you do it, spending time with your dog using positive reinforcement training will benefit both of you. Dogs are amazing, unique animals with whom we can communicate in all kinds of ways, and they don't need to understand our language for this.

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