

7 Tips for Teaching Kids to Button

by Lisa Marnell MBA, MS, OTR/L



Working buttons on clothing is a challenge. This task requires good visual attention, coordinated two-handed skills, and the cognitive skills of solid planning and sequencing. No wonder buttoning is difficult for children to master.

As an occupational therapist with over fifteen years of experience with children, I have often worked on buttoning! In this blog post I offer some of my favorite go-to strategies for teaching kids to button.

Let's start at the beginning . . .

1- Unbutton First:

Unbuttoning first helps kids learn to button in a few ways.

First, children learn how buttons and buttonholes work. In order to learn to button, children must understand the dynamics of how a button slides in and out of the hole. Second, unbuttoning addresses some of the skills needed for buttoning, like hand strength, two-handed (bilateral) coordination, and force modulation (how hard or how gently to pull on the button and material). Third,

when children master unbuttoning, they feel a sense of achievement and a confidence boost: If they can UNBUTTON, then they can learn to BUTTON too!

2- Backward Chaining:

When an adult completes most of the steps of buttoning, and a child completes the final step, this is backward chaining. A nice benefit to backward chaining is that a child enjoys a sense of mastery by being the person who does the final step and gets the job done - or gets the button buttoned! Backward chaining is a nice approach to incorporate into a buttoning session . . . especially at the start in order to get a child motivated.

3- Make it Fun . . . and Name the Steps:

When teaching a child to button, it is very helpful to name to the steps involved in buttoning. As an example, you can pair the feeling of the button sliding into the hole with the words, "Slide In", and with the concept that the button, "slides into his home." Here are the main steps of unbuttoning and buttoning and the words that are paired with each step.

There are 4 steps to unbuttoning, as follows:

- * Pinch the Button
- * Find the Hole
- * Pull Apart
- * Slide Out

There are 5 steps to buttoning, as follows:

- * Pinch the Button
- * Find the Hole
- * Slide In
- * Grab On
- * Pull

4- Get Out the Needle and Thread:

When I began my career as an occupational therapist, I never imagined my rudimentary sewing skills would help me. But they have! And I strongly recommend you try my approach: Take an old shirt and sew very large buttons on it (about an inch in diameter). Next, cut the holes bigger.



I have found large buttons on Amazon by searching "kids buttons". This sounds like a lot of work, but when buttons and buttonholes are larger, the tasks of buttoning and unbuttoning are made so much easier. This hack will help children learn to button so much quicker!

5- Practice the Buttoning Sequence Step by Step:

One of the best ways to master skills is to break them down into their most basic components. Using the steps outlined in the second point above, teach kids to button step by step. Know that buttoning takes days or weeks for most kids to master. So know that the goal of these practice sessions is to practice ONE step at a time. Children learn better when they are having fun, so turn these steps into games.

Pinch the Button:

Ask the child to pinch the button with one hand. The hand which is used will differ, depending on whether the child is using a "girl's shirt" or a "boy's shirt". But pinching the button is all she has to focus on right now. In order to work on the child's hand strength and to solidify their understanding of how to hold something tightly, play a game I call "Windy Day", and I shake the shirt a little, telling the child to "Pinch the Button!"

Find the Hole:

In this step, the child learns to locate the hole with her other hand. I teach the child to press her thumb against the hole. This builds a child's stereognosis, which describes the tactile sensitivity in a child's hand or the ability to "recognize" objects without looking at them. Turn this into a game by having the child hold the button with one hand and hold the hole with the other hand. Ask him if his thumb is on the hole or not on the hole. Have him open his fingers then try to position one hand on the button and the thumb of the other

hand on the hole again. Have him try positioning his hands correctly with his closed eyes.

Slide In:

Once a child has mastered positioning both hands correctly on the button and the hole, he is ready to try to slide the button into the hole. Generally, kids like this step as they feel like they are closer to buttoning by themselves. Tell kids that the button is a snake who is sliding into his hole in the ground.



Grab On:

This is the hardest step, when it really helps to be using larger buttons and buttonholes. In this step, the child must grab the button with the other hand. Be sure to use the same words all the time, "Grab On", at this stage so the kids understand the concept. This stage takes practice, and kids will not master it at first. Help them initially so they don't become frustrated, fading your assistance as skills improve.

Pull:

Once kids manage to get the feel for pulling the button through, they are nearly there. Again, help children at this stage to ensure they are managing to button, and fade your help as they gain mastery of buttoning.

6- Start at the Bottom of the Shirt:

One of the biggest challenges kids face with buttoning is being able to watch what their fingers are doing as they button. Starting buttons at the top of a shirt makes buttoning even harder for kids. Starting at the bottom of a shirt allows them to better watch their hands and to better see the button and the

hole.

7- Play "I'm a Button!": A game to teach the concept of buttoning.

In order to button, children must understand the way buttoning works: A button goes in or out of the buttonhole, depending if you button or unbutton. Placing a button in a button hole is similar to stepping in and out of a doorway. For a break from buttoning, children can play a listening game as they step in and out of a doorway. When an adult says, "Button", the child steps out the door. When an adult says, "Unbutton", the child steps back through the door.

Another variation is to have a child hold a hula hoop over his head. When an adult says, "Button", the child pulls the hula hoop down over his head and body. When an adult says, "Unbutton", the child raises the hula hoop up again, over his head.

Feel welcome to leave a comment. What are your favorite tips for helping kids learn to button? What steps do your students or kids struggle with?

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