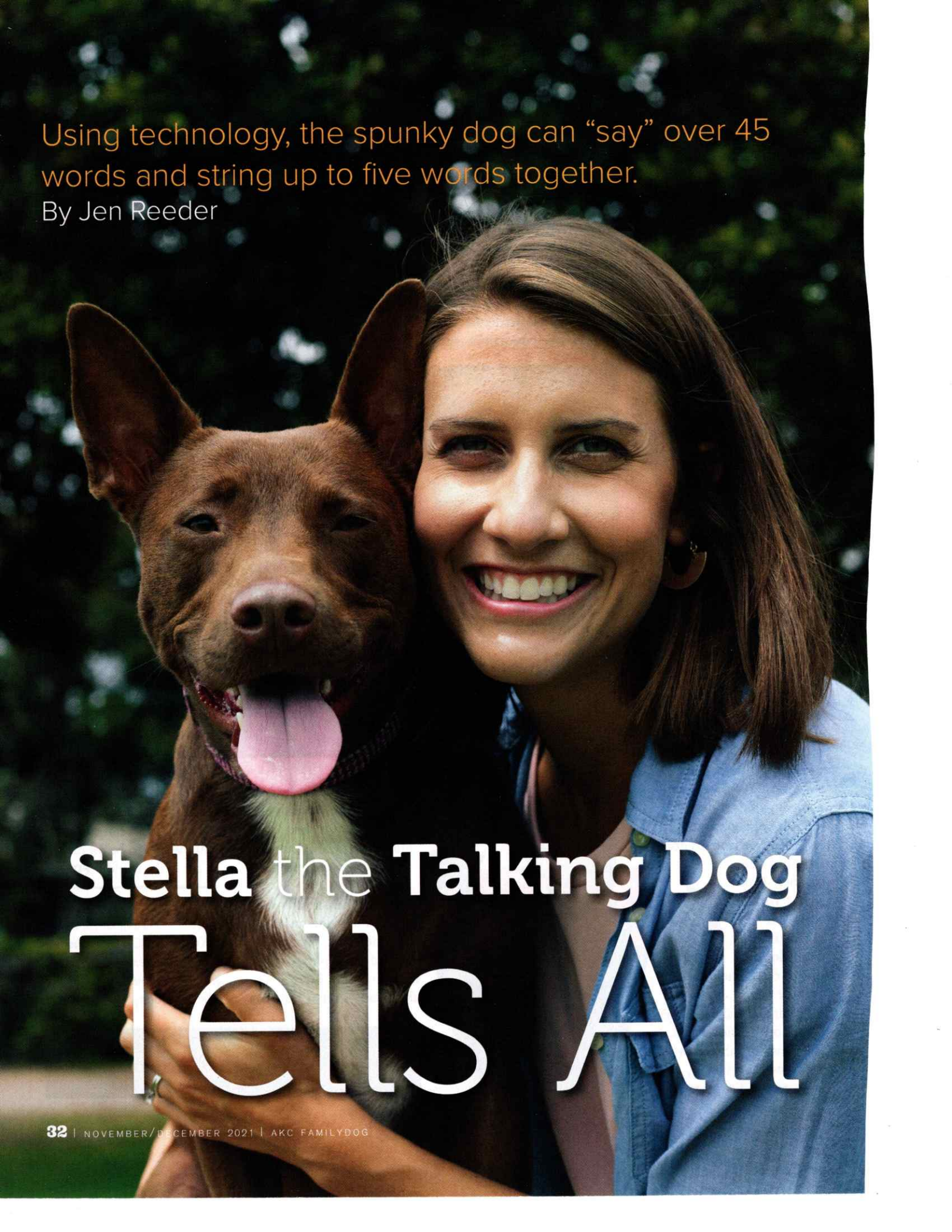


Using technology, the spunky dog can “say” over 45 words and string up to five words together.

By Jen Reeder

A close-up photograph of a woman with long, straight brown hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a light blue denim shirt. She is holding a brown dog with large, upright ears and a white patch on its chest. The dog's tongue is hanging out, and it appears happy. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees.

Stella the Talking Dog Tells All

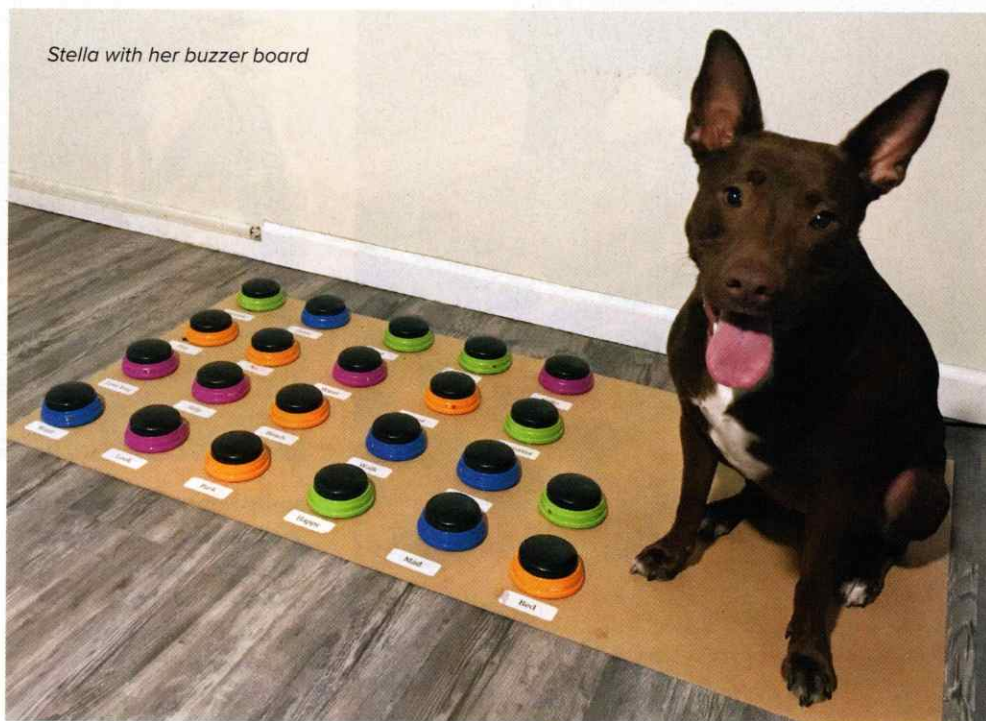
Speech pathologist Christina Hunger fervently believes everyone deserves a voice—including dogs.

Literally.

Over three years ago, when she started training her 9-week-old Australian Cattle Dog mix, Stella, in basic obedience, she also started teaching her to talk—not to bark at the cue *speak*, but to use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to communicate in English. Hunger had noticed Stella communicating in similar ways that toddlers do while developing their language skills just before saying words.

“She was using so many different gestures to communicate,” Hunger says. “She was using her eye gaze to direct our attention toward things that she was communicating about. She was pawing at the door, pawing at her water bowl. She was whining and barking in combination with these gestures.”

So Hunger, who was familiar with AAC from her work with children with autism, bought recordable answer buzzers and started with the words *outside*, *play*, and *water*. She’d narrate activities and press the corresponding button with her foot (for instance, saying and pressing *outside* before opening the door to the backyard). Her then-boyfriend, now-husband, Jake



McConkey, learned how to model words for Stella as well.

The Great Outside

“I really wanted to help her have a way to communicate more effectively with us because I didn’t want her to just be following all of the commands that I gave,” she says. “I wanted her to have autonomy and be able to say those things back to us, if it’s something she was wanting us to do as well.”

Patience proved key. At the start of the third week with buzzers, Stella looked pointedly at the *outside* buzzer when she needed to go to the bathroom, then to Hunger, and back at the buzzer—gesturing to Hunger to push it—a small but major victory. The couple

continued modeling words and eventually Stella tried pushing buzzers herself.

Stella began using her first and favorite word, *outside*, to generalize interest in going into both the back and front yards. In time, Hunger added buzzers with words like *park* and *beach* so Stella could let them know specifically where she’d like to recreate on any given day. (Other additions included *bye*, *come*, *no*, *help*, *eat*, and an irresistible choice: *love you*.)

Party’s Over

In the early stages of Stella’s learning process, the couple hosted a party. At the end of the evening, their friends were standing near the door for a protracted “Midwestern goodbye”

while Stella looked on.

“We had said ‘bye,’ then we started telling more stories, then hugging, and then starting a conversation again,” Hunger recalls. “Stella hopped off the couch, walked in the middle of our circle and said, *Bye*—and looked up at all of our friends. Their jaws literally dropped. ‘I can’t believe your puppy just told us *bye!* She’s ready for us to go!’ ”

The guests took their cue and left. Stella watched them go to their cars, then put herself to bed.

Because it was one of the first times she said *bye*, Hunger isn’t sure whether the pup was commenting on what was happening or if she was directing them to leave.

“But either way, it was



Inquisitive puppy
Stella

dog uses the word *good* to praise her or Jake for a longer walk, play session, or other positive experience.

“Sometimes she comments on her own behaviors, so she’ll say, *Stella good* or *good Stella* when she’s done something that we’re really proud of. ... I love seeing that self-awareness and just her ability to talk about something that’s good in her eyes,” she says.

Hunger’s pioneering work has led to a talking dog TikTok craze, with people training their pets to “speak” using AAC devices. Their online videos range from amusing—such as megastar Bunny, who has over 6.5 million TikTok followers, possibly sharing the contents of her dreams—to tacky, such as sponsored ads for treat companies (a dog presses the button for *treat* and the person feeds a specific brand while gushing over it).

Teaching a dog to “talk” has captured the imagination of so many dog lovers around the world that

over 2,500 pet dogs from around 40 countries are participating in a research study launched in 2020 called “They Can Talk,” which involves making videos of dogs (and over 100 cats) communicating with sound buttons and submitting them to researchers. (The website describes the research as a collaboration between CleverPet—maker of an AAC device for dogs called FluentPet—and the University of California, San Diego. Participants are not required to use voice buttons from FluentPet, but many do, according to the intake form.)

Hunger thought it would take a long time for people to understand her work with Stella, and never expected the tremendous response.

“It’s been such a fun surprise to see how many people have been teaching their own dogs and how this has grown so far beyond just me and Stella—and in

such a short amount of time,” she says. “It’s helping so many dog owners understand their pets more and helping the pet talk about what’s been going on in their minds this whole time.”

She hopes people who don’t teach their dogs to communicate with AAC will still appreciate how much potential dogs have and treat them with respect, knowing that such a level of communication is possible.

“I think it’s a really exciting time to be thinking about dog cognition and what they might be capable of,” she says. “This is just a sign that there’s so much more to explore.”

Con Slobodchikoff, Ph.D., professor emeritus at Northern Arizona University’s Department of Biological Sciences, director of the Animal Language Institute, and author

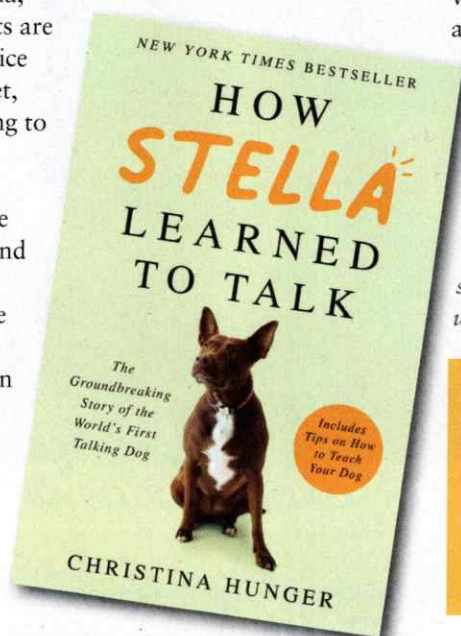
of several books, including *Chasing Doctor Doolittle: Learning the Language of Animals*, commends Hunger’s compelling book and methodical work that shows dogs have the cognitive capacity to use language to communicate with people.

“I think this will have a tremendous implication for how we view dogs and perhaps how we view animals in general,” he says.

Slobodchikoff, whose scientific study of prairie dogs found they have a complex communication system, is also the CEO of Zoolingua, which is developing artificial intelligence technology to develop a pet translator to decode dog language.

“People have an enormous appetite to communicate with their animals,” he says. “So I think anything we can develop in terms of technology that will facilitate that will be a huge help to both people and animals.” **FD**

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder’s dog, Rio, understands over 60 words and phrases. If he learned to speak with an AAC device, she suspects his favorite word would be swim.



For more information, visit hungerforwords.com or [instagram.com/hunger4words](https://www.instagram.com/hunger4words).