



BUTTON, BUTTON, WHO'S GOT THE BUTTON

2021 Leader's guide and Members handout
Written by Cindy Kiser, KAFCE Education Program Committee

“Button, button, who’s got the button” brings to mind a childhood game. When we talk about buttons many people share how they used to play with their grandmother’s button collection. This collection often kept in a jar or tin. There can be buttons in many things, not just clothing, or crafts, but also poker, music, politics, education, on and on. You can look for them at a local fabric store, national discount store, online, school, poetry, or at a restaurant in Texas.

Button-like objects of stone, glass, bone, ceramic, and gold have been found at archaeological sites dating as early as 2000 B.C.E., but evidence suggests that these objects were used as decoration on cloth or strung like beads. Nevertheless, they have the familiar holes through which to pass a thread, which gives them the appearance of the button currently known as a fastener.

Almost every material that has been used in the fine and decorative arts has been used historically in the production of buttons. Buttons exist in a variety of materials: metals (precious or otherwise), gemstones, ivory, horn, wood, bone, mother-of-pearl, glass, porcelain, paper, and silk. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, celluloid and other artificial materials have been used to imitate natural materials.

The precursor to the button fastener was the fibula, a brooch or pin used to hold two pieces of clothing on the shoulder or chest. The button began to replace the fibula at least by the early Middle Ages, if not sooner.

Buttons functioned as primary fastenings for men's garments earlier than for women's. This may be due to the fact that the women's was required to be tight and smoothly fitted. Lacings and hooks are better suited to providing the strong hold and smooth appearance necessary for tight-fitting garments.

The eighteenth century is considered the Golden Age of buttons by collectors, as the variety of styles, as well as the physical size of buttons increase dramatically. Men's coats required buttons at the front opening, sleeves, pockets, and back vents. Waistcoats and breeches were also fastened with buttons. The size of the button grows and the shape generally flattens during the course of the century, ending in the flat disk as large as 1.38 inch in diameter. The value of decorations on a man's ensemble during this period, composed of metal thread embroidery and jeweled buttons, could account for as much as 80 percent of the cost of the suit of clothes. Thus, luxurious buttons became an increasingly essential part of the expression of status in upper-class men's dress.

As the button evolved from a ball to a flat disk, another notable change in decorative technique was the use of the button as a palette for painting. Representational images became immensely popular in the second half of the eighteenth century and are related to the miniature portraits that were worn as pendants or pins during the period.

In 1812, Aaron Benedict established a metal button-making factory in Waterbury, Connecticut, to supply metal buttons for the military. Until that time, many metal buttons



were still coming from England, but the War of 1812 brought trade between the United States and Britain to a halt. As of 2020, Benedict's company, which became known as Waterbury Buttons, had been in business for 208 years. It is the oldest and largest producer of stamped metal buttons in the United States. Statistics from 1996 show that they produced 100 million buttons-about one-half for fashion trade and the remainder for military and commercial clients.

While more buttons were mass-produced in the nineteenth century that did not mean that fewer materials were employed in the creation of buttons. Natural materials like horn and shells, which had been used for centuries, were rediscovered as mass-produced items. New materials such as celluloid, the first plastic, were used as early as the 1870s to imitate other materials.

Representational picture buttons, first introduced in the late eighteenth century, reached their peak between 1870 and 1914. The nineteenth-century scenes were generally mass-produced stamped metal designs depicting any motif imaginable, but contemporary marvels like the Eiffel Tower were especially popular.

Bakelite was invented in 1907 and by the 1930s had replaced almost all other synthetics for accessories. Durable and versatile, Bakelite was the medium for some of the most extravagant buttons of the twentieth century, but other plastics eventually replaced it. Three-dimensional accessories, such as fruit shapes, were created in the 1930s and 40s when small accessories like buttons were especially popular. In 1910s to the 30s, the Toostietoy Company in Chicago made buttons to be used as prizes in Cracker Jack treats.

Plastics replaced most inexpensive glass and pearl buttons by the 1960s. That coupled with the fact that natural materials such as ivory and tortoiseshell are now banned in the United States and other countries has led to the dominance of plastic buttons made to imitate these materials. Mother-of-pearl is still used but in much smaller quantities than in the past.

Buttons have become extremely collectible. The National Button Society exists for collectors and publishes a quarterly bulletin and holds an annual meeting and show. There are similar societies in Britain and Australia and elsewhere in the world. But what will you do with your collection of buttons? None of mine are collection-worthy. Are yours kept in a tin or a special jar, bowl, or container?

If you are like me and find yourself with a collection of buttons that are more worthy of a decorative jar in your living room than the National Button Society, then keep reading for more crafts ideas and activities that use buttons! I also have many crafts and games pinned on my Pinterest account (cindy1766), so if you are a "pinner" just follow me and you can access more projects.

BUTTON GAMES:

Button exchange: Underneath three plastic containers (can be different colored) place a different button. To begin with, the buttons underneath each container should be shown. Then push the containers around to mix them up until you think that the



observer no longer remembers which button is under which container. If the opponent still manages to guess where each button is they take over the game. If they do not guess correctly they should try guessing again.

Guessing by hearing: In a non-see through container there are 5-10 buttons. By shaking the container the approximate number of buttons has to be guessed.

Guessing by hearing. Behind a wall, a handful of buttons (5-10) are dropped on the floor. Can the group standing in front of the wall guess how many buttons fell on the floor? During this game there needs to be total silence. Additionally the buttons should be different (plastic buttons, metal buttons, small and large buttons etc.) to create different sounds on making impact with the floor.

Guessing by observation: In a glass jar there are between 200-300 buttons. How many buttons are in the jar?

Memorize & Describe: Approximately 20 different buttons are shown and then covered up. Who will remember the buttons and be able to precisely describe them? (Color, holes, size)

Button flicking: At a distance of 15 to 30 inches, attempt to flick buttons towards a target or into a box. The target could have varying points on it. The more skillful the flicking the more points that can be achieved.

Stacking buttons: Buttons are stacked on top of one another. As the buttons are not all identical this task is not as easy as it may seem. The button tower will quickly come into difficulty.

Who's got the Button? Reign in those observation skills in this classic game. All you need is one button and it's great if you're having a party of kids over that day. It's a bit like Duck, Duck, Goose, but without the chasing. Have the kids (except one) get in a circle with their hands behind their back. Then give the outlying kid the one button and have him or her walk around the circle. He or she should discreetly leave the button in someone's palm and loop around a few times before getting in the middle and chanting, "Button, button, who's got the button?" Everyone will then take turns to guess and whoever guesses correctly gets to be the next person to hide the button!

Calculations with buttons. Materials: Five different colored buttons. Each button has a different value,

E.g. red button=5; Blue button=7; Black button=9; Yellow button=3; Green button=11.

Participants have to remember the value of each button. 10 buttons are shown one after the other. The players have to add the total value of the buttons shown.



Button rolling. Several types of buttons are ideal for rolling. Try to roll a button as far as possible on a smooth-surfaced floor.

Threading buttons. Buttons are strung together. Who will string together the most buttons within 60 seconds? To make things equal ensure that all of the buttons/button holes are the same size.

Sewing on buttons. Always an activity for outdoor games. Within 60 (120) seconds sew as many buttons as possible onto a piece of material.

Spinning Buttons. Thread two buttons onto a 2-foot length of string, then tie it into a loop. Holding each end of the loop, whirl the buttons around to wind them on the string. Pull your hands apart to spin the buttons, then let the string go slack so that they spin and rewind. Repeat the motion to get the buttons spinning faster.

Flicking buttons off the table. By shoving/flicking, buttons are moved from the table into containers on the floor (tubs etc.). The containers should be approximately 20 to 40 inches from the table.

Pitching pennies (buttons). If pitching pennies works with cent pieces or bottle caps, then it will work with buttons! The buttons are played towards a wall, at a distance of 6 to 9 feet. The goal is to get your button as close to the wall as possible. The winner receives all the buttons of that round.

Sorting buttons through touch. Whilst blind-folded, sort buttons according to their size and number of holes.

Reviewed by Jessika Workman, CNO Lovelace Rehabilitation Hospital, Albuquerque, NM

Resources: <https://mermaidsden.com/blog/brief-history-of-buttons>
<https://blog.samuel-windsor.co.uk/brief-guide-buttons-history>
http://www.antiquebuttons.nl/index_en.php?p0=history_of_buttons
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/design/2012/06/button_history_a_visual_tour_of_button_design_through_the_ages_.html

Games: <http://www.youthwork-practice.com/games/games-with-buttons.html>