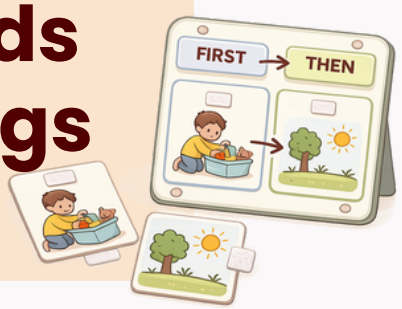
Using "First–Then" Boards in Early Childhood Settings

A Quick Start Guide for Educators



Adapted from Meadan, H., Ostrosky, M. M., Triplett, B., Michna, A., & Fettig, A. (2011). Using visual supports with young children with autism spectrum disorder. Teaching Exceptional Children, 43(6), 28-35.

What is a First–Then board?

A **First–Then** visual shows a child:

FIRST — the activity or task that needs to happen (usually something "non-preferred")
THEN — what will happen afterward (usually something "preferred")

It is useful when a child:

- avoids or resists a non-preferred activity
- has difficulty transitioning
- needs clear structure to stay engaged
- benefits from visual communication rather than verbal reminders

First–Then visuals help:

- increase predictability
- clarify expectations
- support motivation
- reduce frustration and behavior during transitions

They can be used during short tasks, routines, centers, or movement between activities.

When to Use First–Then Supports

Use First–Then when the goal is to:

- help the child **start or complete a task**
- prepare for a **transition to a new activity**
- show **how much is required before a break or choice**
- pair a **non-preferred activity with a preferred one**

Examples in preschool:

First clean up → Then outside

First sit for circle → then choose a puzzle

First finish art → Then blocks

First bathroom → Then snack