

USING A FIRST-THEN BOARD

Kelly Shepherd, M.Ed.
Field Training Coordinator,
Kentucky Autism Training Center

A major challenge when working with individuals with autism is giving directions that are clear to the individual. (Quill, 1995). Individuals with autism often have difficulty understanding direction or rules as given to peers. Visual supports are a common tool used to assist individuals with autism with this understanding. Visual supports include schedules, scripts, calendars, choice boards and First-Then boards. These supports can be created using pictures (Boardmaker or photographs), print, or a combination, depending upon the level of the child.

Many individuals with autism are motivated differently and often have difficulties "waiting" for the reinforcer. Professionals and parents alike must come up with creative ways to motivate the individual to complete a task. First-then boards are one such way. These boards are designed to make a nonpreferred task seem more pleasing and to help the student understand that a "fun" task or reinforcer is coming after the work is completed. To use a First-then board, the following steps should be taken.

- Using a reinforcer assessment, assess what will motivate the individual
- Make a picture (photo or Boardmaker) of the preferred item
- Make a picture of the nonpreferred task
- Place these pictures together on a board with one side labeled First the other side labeled Then
- Show the board to the individual prior to beginning the nonpreferred task
- Using the board, say, First _____ Then_____.
- Once the nonpreferred activity is completed, the student is immediately given the preferred item/activity.
- The initial use of the First-Then Board should involve an activity that is relatively brief in time in order for the child to see and understand the rule of first doing some work, then getting something fun.

As a part of a school based consultation at James T. Alton Middle School in Hardin County, the team incorporated first-then boards at both school and home. Team members included: Stephanie Thomas, parent, Debbie Vogel, teacher, Teresa Wilson, SLP, Penny Amerine, Instructional Assistant and Kelly Shepperd, field training coordinator, KATC.

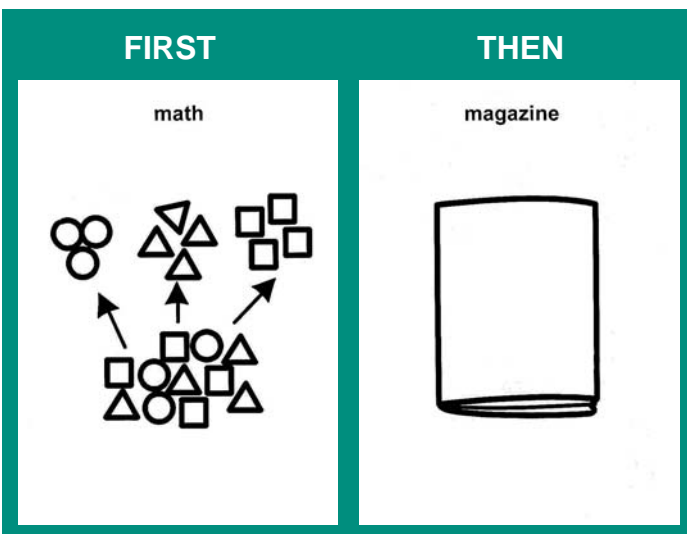
Below: (left to right) Penny Aminine, Debby Vogel, Jay Thomas and Teresa Wilson



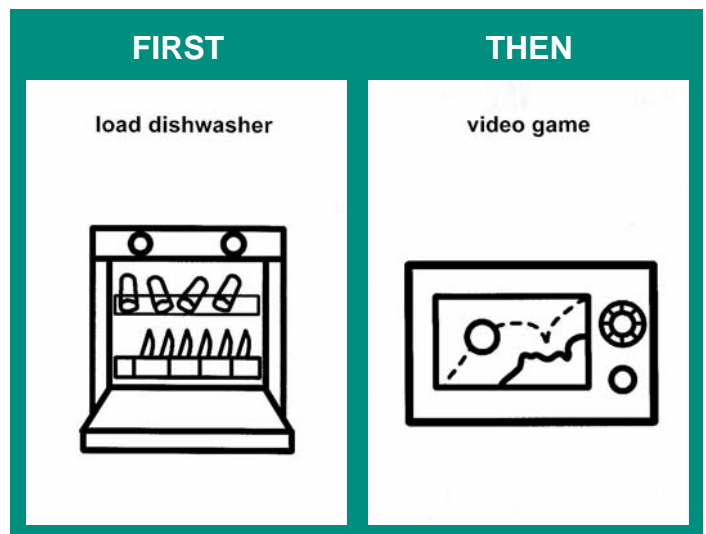
Jay Thomas, a middle school student in a self-contained classroom seemed unmotivated to complete his class work. He was not disruptive; however, he would not complete class work without multiple prompts. The classroom staff needed a way to get him to complete work such as hands on math with less prompts.

The team implemented a First-Then Board. As a part of the training agenda for the school based consultation, Jay's team completed a reinforcer assessment. By doing this, the team determined that particular NASCAR items, sports magazines, computer games and certain videos would motivate Jay. Each of these items have been used as a part of a first-then board with Jay. For the purpose of this article we will discuss the sports magazine as an example.

SCHOOL



HOME



Jay was highly motivated by looking at sports magazines so a picture representing a magazine was placed under then. A picture representing schoolwork was used under first. Using the First-then board prompted Jay to complete his work with minimal prompts. The staff showed him the board saying, "First work, then magazine."

Initially, Jay was given one nonpreferred activity (such as a calendar activity or functional math) to complete and then he was allowed look at a magazine for a set amount of time. Over days, Jay was able to complete nonpreferred tasks more independently and the First-Then board was expanded so that he was expected to complete multiple tasks prior to earning the magazine.

This process is used not only at school, but at home as well. His mother, Stephanie, is an active participant in the school based consultation process. She utilizes the first-then process at home and in the community. For community outings, such as shopping at the local grocery or discount store. His mother knows that he likes to visit the magazine and toy rack at the grocery. In order to finish her shopping, Stephanie uses first-then. Jay is told, "First groceries, then magazines". The same principle is applied when at the discount store, however, there, he enjoys looking at NASCAR merchandise. Jay is told, "First shop for mom, then NASCAR." According to Stephanie, shopping trips with the First-then method are a lot easier than without. She also uses this method when prompting Jay to clean up his room, "First clean, then video". Short errands around town may also prove to be a time when First-then is used. Jay may be prompted to participate in a short trip by using, "First bank, then Nana's." This procedure has proven to be a positive tool in Jay's life at home, school and the community.

Quill, Kathleen Ann, ed. *Teaching Children with Autism: Strategies to Enhance Communication and Socialization*. (New York: Delmar, 1995)

