The Simple and Powerful First-Then Strategy

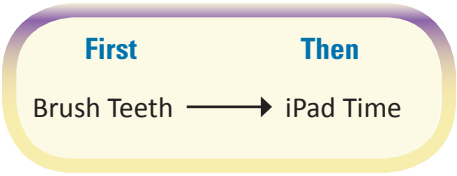
First-Then: What is it?

Many of us have heard of the First-Then strategy and have most likely used it at some point in our work or personal lives. What exactly is this strategy and how does it work?

The First-Then strategy is another term to describe the Premack Principle. This strategy is one way to motivate someone to complete a task, by following that task with a preferred item or activity. By structuring a task in this way, a person is more likely to complete the non-preferred task if they know that a preferred item or activity will come after. The next time you say, "First clean up your toys, then we can go outside and play," the person is more likely to clean up their toys since they know a favourable activity will follow.

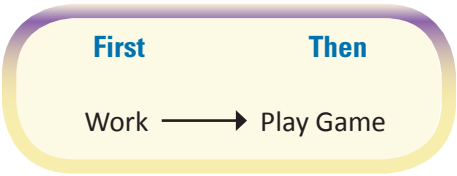
Why use First-Then?

- To create motivation to complete a non-preferred task or activity
- To increase independence
- To provide predictability in what will come next
- To give clear expectations
- To assist with transitions between activities, locations, tasks, events

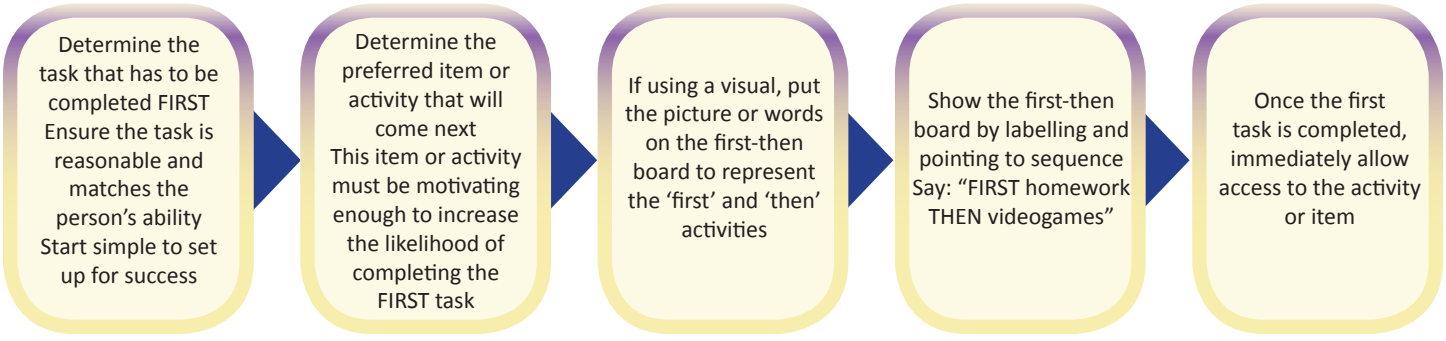


Depending on the person's strengths and learning style, you can present First-Then:

- Visually using a First-Then board with pictures or text
- Verbally by saying, "First put your plate in the sink, then dessert"
- Visually and verbally together



How to Use First-Then



Considerations:

- Limit access to preferred THEN items when used to motivate completion of FIRST tasks
- Remember to work towards independence by moving through sequence with minimal assistance
- Is the FIRST-THEN board visible to the person so they can check that the sequence is predictable?
- Is the THEN item readily available? If not, choose a different item

Lentini, R, Vaughan, BJ & Fox, L. (2005). Teaching Tools For Young Children with Challenging Behavior. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida