How to use a first-then board and a picture schedule.

Esta lección en español

What it is. A **first-then board** shows two things in order: what happens first (the thing you're asking for) and what comes then (something they want). A **picture schedule** is the same idea stretched out: the steps of a routine, in pictures or words, in order, so a child can see what's coming and what's done.

Why it matters. Spoken words are gone the moment you say them; a board stays where the child can see it. It makes the deal visible and puts the end of the hard part in sight, which is often what an open-ended demand is missing.

HOW TO DO IT YOURSELF

How to use a first-then board yourself, in six steps.

1. **Pick the "first": one small thing they can finish now.** "Shoes on," not "get ready." Start smaller than you think; you can grow it later.
2. **Pick the "then": something they really want, ready to give right after.** Not sure what they want? Run a preference assessment.
3. **Show it and say it once, pointing to each box:** "First shoes, then bubbles." Pictures for children who don't read yet, words for those who do.
4. **When "first" is done, give "then" right away.** Every time, especially at the start. That is what makes the board believable.
5. **If they don't start, don't swap the order.** Wait, point to the board, help with the first move (a prompt), and keep your voice calm. Giving "then" first teaches that the

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board is optional.

6. **Grow it into a schedule.** Once first-then works, line up three to five steps with a favorite one last, and let them check off each step as it’s done.

Settled: visual supports work. The 2020 national review of autism interventions counted visual supports as an evidence-based practice, backed by more than a hundred studies, for ages from toddlers to young adults (Steinbrenner and colleagues, 2020). The first-then order is an old rule of behavior: something a person wants to do can reinforce something they don’t, when it comes right after (Premack, 1959).

WORKED EXAMPLE

Maya and bath time.

Made-up example. The child, the family and the nights below are invented to show the method.

Maya is five, and bath time ends in tears most nights. Her dad draws a board: FIRST a bath, THEN the bubble wand she loves, which now appears only after the bath. At 7:00 he shows it, says “First bath, then bubbles” once, and points to each box.

When	What happened
Night 1	She cried at the tub. Dad waited, pointed to the board, and helped her step in. Bubbles came the moment the bath was done.
Night 3	She walked to the tub after the second point.

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Night 6	She walked in after the first “First bath, then bubbles.”
Week 3	The board became a bedtime schedule: bath, pajamas, teeth, story. Her favorite, the story, is last.

What made it work: the “then” was something she really wanted, it came right after, every time, and her dad never swapped the order when she cried. That is the whole method.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Ways a board stops working.

- A “first” that is too big or too vague, like “be good” or “get ready.” Break it into steps and put one step on the board.
- A “then” that is far away (“Saturday”) or not really wanted.
- Giving “then” first to stop the crying. That turns the board into a bribe: the crying earned the bubbles.
- Using the board only for hard things. Put easy wins on it too, so the board predicts good things.
- A schedule on the wall that nobody touches. Check off each step as it’s done, or it turns into wallpaper.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

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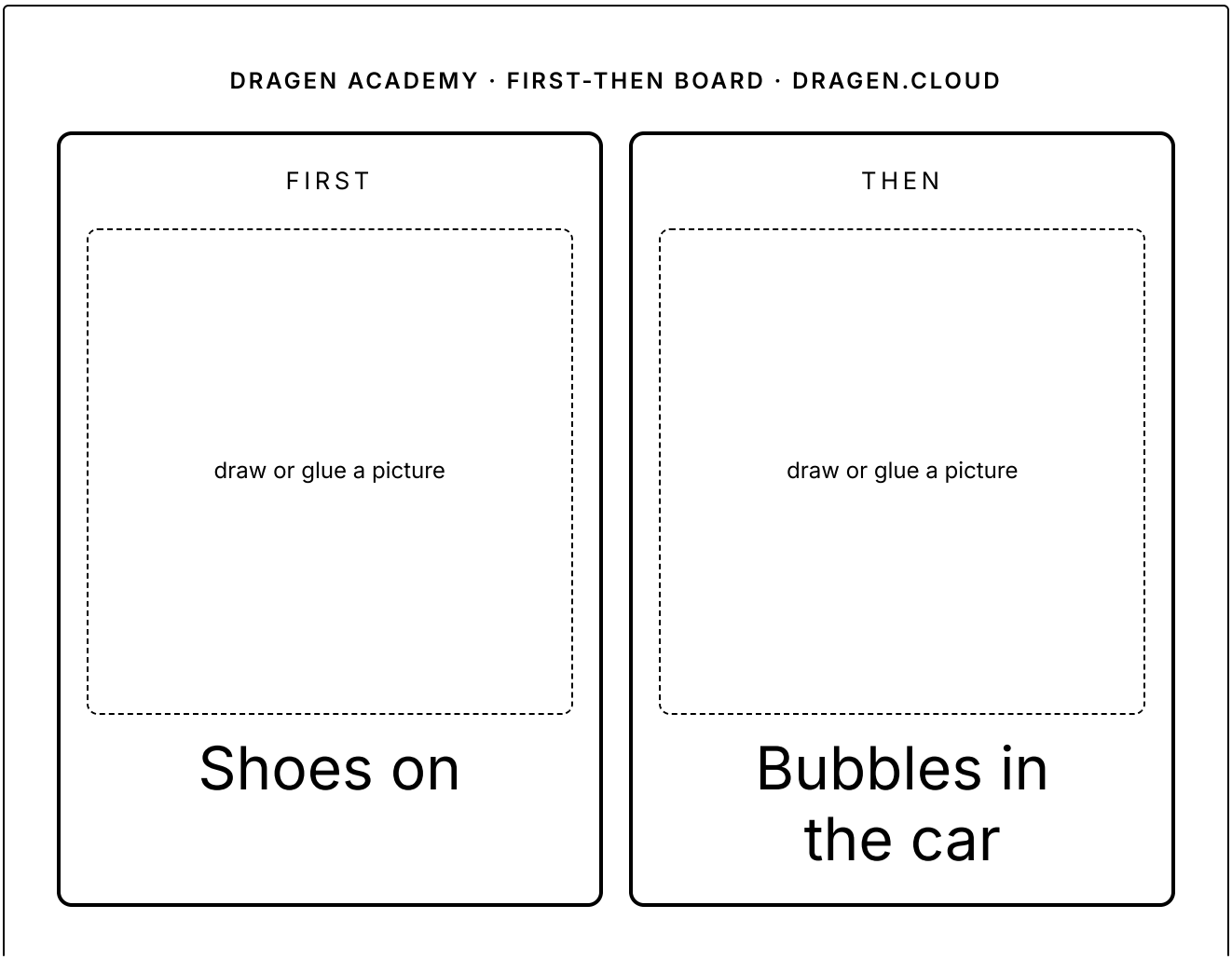
A made-up case: Jonah’s board says FIRST clean up blocks, THEN tablet. He puts two blocks in the bin and says “Done!” What do you do?

▼ Show the answer, and why

Point to the board, help him finish, and give the tablet when the blocks are in the bin. But notice the real problem: “clean up” never said where done is. Tomorrow, write a “first” he can see the end of, like “Ten blocks in the bin.” Why: a board is only fair when the finish line is clear before you start.

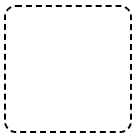
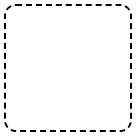
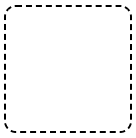
Something to keep

Make your board and schedule, then print them.



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MY SCHEDULE · CHECK EACH ONE WHEN IT’S DONE

1		Bath	☐
2		Pajamas	☐
3		Brush teeth	☐
4		Story	☐

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

When a board isn’t enough.

If the board works for a week and then stops, or the crying gets bigger instead of smaller, something else is going on, and a behavior analyst can help find it.

DRAGENfamily, the hub at home, logs what you see as it happens and shows the last two weeks as a graph, so every adult works from the same page. The paper version above works tonight.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and its 2 printable sheets. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

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Steinbrenner, Hume, Odom and colleagues (2020), *Evidence-Based Practices for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Autism*, National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice, FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina: visual supports. Premack (1959), *Psychological Review*, 66, 219–233: the first-then rule.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your BCBA, your program, or your payer's written rules.

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