First-then boards are some of the simplest types of schedules that we use with students with autism and other disabilities.

**Simply put, it just presents what we need to do now (first) – a structured activity and what we will do next (then) – a reward/preferred activity.**   We typically use them in different ways depending on the student.  Sometimes we use them for behavior support, such as when we think (or know) that an individual doesn't want to do something we want them to do.  In that case, we present the thing we want them to do in the "first" and the thing they want to do in the "then."  The idea is to show them a preferred activity or a possible reinforcer to motivate them to complete the thing they don't want to do.

**Why do we utilize visual supports?** Many caregivers of individuals with ASD become frustrated when teaching new skills to their children. Individuals with ASD may have trouble learning new skills because they do not learn the same way typical people do. Individuals with ASD learn best through visual information. They also prefer information that ties into their interests. Unlike typical children, they do not easily learn by watching and copying others, or by being told what to do. Individuals with ASD are also easily over-stimulated. They need tools to help them make sense of the information they receive. Once given these tools, even anxious or highly prompt-dependent children can begin to do more for themselves.

**Why is visual information much easier for individuals with an ASD to process?** Visual structure and tools can give a sense of routine and structure to anyone. Many learning environments can be overly stimulating because they have so much to see, hear, and touch. With all of this input, students may get distracted or have a hard time focusing on their work. In complex environments, individuals with ASD may try to create their own structure. They may do this by engaging in repetitive or stereotypic behaviors. They may also insist on sameness in their activities. Visual information can provide clear, orderly, and predictable information for the individual. This information can also teach him or her how to adapt to change. Visual information remains present as long as they need it, unlike verbal input which is given and then is gone. Visual information allows for longer processing time. When the individual uses visual information well, they are less dependent on prompts from adults; which makes them more independent.

**Can all individuals benefit?** Even individuals with ASD who are highly verbal and intelligent can benefit from visual strategies. These individuals have some difficulty in processing verbal information and in organizing their responses. The visual strategies do not replace the language use, but can help with language understanding. Each person’s visual strategies can be changed over time to meet their interests, skills, and functioning level.

**When can we discontinue the use of visuals?** Oftentimes, visual structure is only considered during times of transition and behavioral difficulty. Once such transition times are over and/or the behavioral difficulties subside, caregivers/providers often opt to remove the visuals. This is much like pulling away someone’s security blanket and it sends the individual into turmoil. If visual strategies are tailored to each specific individual, they will function as a calming tool. Having such tools will serve to minimize the stress and lend predictability to the environment. Visual structure should be considered for use in those situations where individuals need adult support to complete an activity, when there is difficulty understanding expectations, and when behaviors, anxiety, or frustration tend to occur. The type and format of the support may change as a person ages and learns new skills.