

Tip 1: Motivating Children (First-Then)



Watch this video

- [Video - Tip 1: First-Then](#)

Definition

The First-Then motivational tip is based on the principle that children are more likely to complete tasks they do not like doing (like writing) in order to do something they prefer (like playing a video game). It is often referred to as Grandma's Rule – First eat your veggies and then you can have ice cream.

First – is the thing you need your child to do, such as a maths question or reading a chapter of a book, etc.

Then – is the thing your child likes to do, an enjoyable task or preferred activity. This is the potential reinforcer – the preferred item or activity that comes after.

Benefits

Benefits of the First-Then tip include:

- it is a great way to engage and motivate people to complete tasks that are non-preferred
- it is easy to gain agreement because you can incorporate their interests and preferred activities
- you can tailor it to your child's required level of support and interests
- it is easy to implement in any setting and can be faded over time
- it helps prevent challenging behaviours from occurring in the first place.

Using this tip

Have a clear objective and be concise.

Keep statements short and easy to understand.

For example, **first** complete your maths homework, **then** you can have five minutes on the video game.

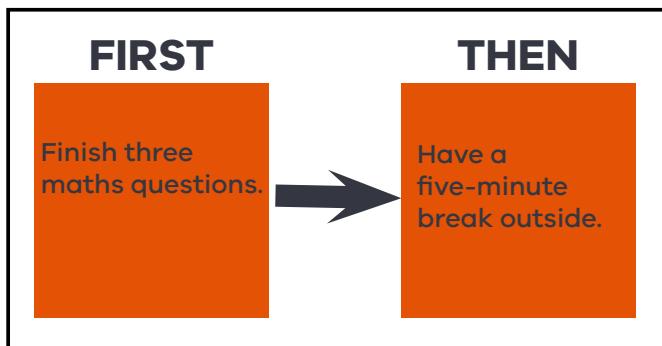
Visuals

Visuals can also be used for First-Then statements to help remind your child what is expected and what will happen when the first task is complete.

You can create visual boards at home using pieces of paper or cardboard with sticky notes, or by drawing up a chart on a child's chalkboard/whiteboard.

Ensure you:

- create a visual board that is age appropriate for your child – size and format
- use corresponding text/picture cards for each activity and reinforcer (if age appropriate)
- make the board engaging and colourful.



Follow through

If your child has completed the task or demonstrated the required action (the **first**), as agreed (e.g. followed the instruction within a set amount of time, etc.) **you need to follow through immediately** with the agreed preferred activity/item (the **then**).

It is **very** important to be consistent so that your child trusts that reinforcement will follow, as agreed.

If you want to see frequent positive behaviour, you need to reinforce it.

Every – Single – Time.

For your child to gain the preferred activity/item, they **must** complete the task/instruction as agreed (e.g. followed the instruction, within a set amount of time, etc.). If your child refuses to do the task/instruction (e.g. three maths questions) you agreed upon, they **do not** get the preferred activity/item (e.g. five-minute break outside).

It is important that the task is realistic for your child. The length and difficulty can be increased over time, once they trust the process. Start small so that your child can receive their preferred activity/item easily and achieve success, then build on this over time.

Make it valuable to your child

The preferred activity/item (the **then**) **must** be **immediately** available to your child once they have completed the **first** task. The key is finding a preferred activity/item valuable enough to encourage the desired skill or action (the **first**).

If you have to keep repeating the same 'First ___, **then** ___' again and again and your child isn't completing the task, it probably isn't reinforcing enough for them. Try different activities or items as your **then**, until you see an increase in the **first** behaviour. It is very important to find a **then** that motivates your child.

You can do this by asking your child what they would like to work for.

- Provide two or three preferred activities/items that your child can choose from (e.g. would you like to work for five minutes on the tablet, or have a five-minute break outside?)
- Allow your child to select something from a short list of activities or items.

Keep it positive

Many parents get into the habit of giving demands, then the child resists, and the parent tells the child what they will lose. This can easily escalate into a power struggle.

For example:

- **parent:** 'Please finish your homework.'
- **child:** 'No, I don't want to!'
- **parent:** 'If you don't do your homework, then you can't use the computer.'

This makes the child focus on what they are going to **lose** and on the non-preferred task, causing frustration, which can lead to challenging behaviour. Using **First-Then** language helps you keep the exchange positive and your child can focus on their preferred activity/item (the **then**).

Make a new deal

How do you get your child to finish the preferred activity/item and start a new task?

Simple – you start a new **First-Then** deal!

Whenever possible use a visual timer to time the preferred activity/item (e.g. five-minute break outside) and be sure to stick to it **every single time!** When the timer is up, ask your child what they would like to work for next by providing two or three choices or asking them to select from a short list of activities or items.

Once your child has chosen their preferred activity/item, it is time to start a new deal. State the **first** after your child has chosen their preferred activity/item (the **then**).

For example:

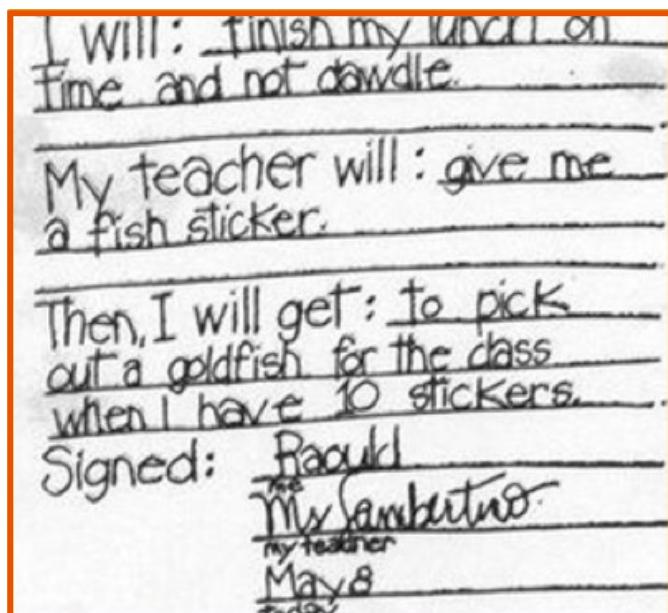
- **parent:** 'OK, Julie, would you prefer to work for five minutes of tablet time or a five-minute walk outside?'
- **child:** 'A five-minute walk outside.'
- **parent:** 'Great, **first** read six pages of the book, **then** you can have a five-minute walk outside.'

Fading

Ultimately, the goal is to gradually fade out the **First-Then** support over time to increase your child's independence. This is done by slowly increasing the task demand (e.g. length, difficulty, number of tasks, etc.) and/or decreasing the length of the reinforcement (preferred activity/item) time (e.g. from 10 minutes to eight minutes).

First-Then agreement

A written **First-Then** agreement is best suited for long-term goals. It can be an individual agreement created between you and your child. Teachers often use these agreements with individual students (see student example below).



Best Practice Tips

When using the First-Then tip:

- keep the wording brief and easy to understand
- do not attach a punishment to the First-Then agreement
- repeat the same First-Then deal, and remember to say it in the exact same way
- if your child needs help with the task, it is okay to help them – especially in the beginning.