HELPING HAND

Empowering children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities across Chicago through person-centered education, therapy, residential, and employment programs.

Visual Schedule & First/Then Boards

Remember: Visual schedules are tools for communication and predictability, not rigid rules. The goal is to help individuals understand their day, express their needs, and participate more independently.

Every person's needs are different. For many individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), visual schedules work best when tailored to their communication style, preferences, and daily routines. We created this toolkit as a starting point. Adapt the activities and format, and add familiar photos or symbols, to make it meaningful for the person using it.

How to Use Your Visual Schedule

Visual schedules help make daily activities and transitions more predictable. By showing what is happening now and what comes next, they can support understanding, independence, and communication for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Getting Started

Print and cut out the activity cards. Laminate them for repeated use, if desired. Attach velcro dots to the back of each card so activities can be added, removed, or rearranged easily.

Choose the schedule format that best meets the individual's needs.

Option 1: Vertical Daily Schedule

A vertical schedule displays several activities in the order they will happen.

1. Arrange the activity cards from top to bottom, beginning with the first activity.
2. Review the schedule together before starting the day or routine.
3. Point to the current activity and explain what comes next using clear, simple language.
4. As each activity is completed, remove its card or move it to an "All Done" area.
5. Review the schedule again before transitions or whenever plans change.

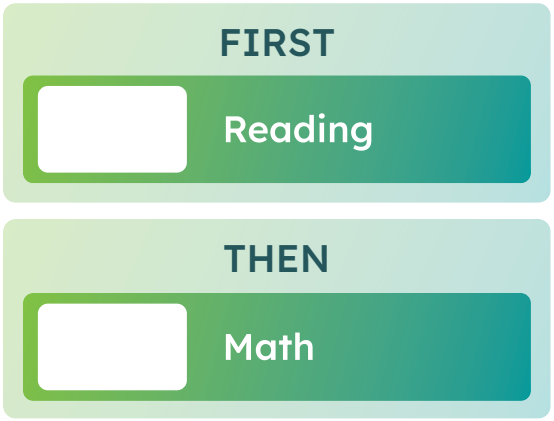


Example of a vertical daily schedule.

Option 2: First/Then Board

A First/Then board displays just two activities at a time. It can be especially helpful for individuals who find longer schedules overwhelming.

1. Place the current activity under FIRST.
2. Place the following activity under THEN.
3. Point to each card and explain the sequence: "First reading, then lunch."
4. When the first activity is complete, remove its card and show the next sequence.



Example of a First/Then board.

Helpful Tips

- Introduce the schedule during a calm, familiar routine.
- Use consistent, simple language while pointing to the pictures.
- Give advance notice of transitions when possible.
- Allow time for the individual to process the information.
- Involve the individual in choosing, placing, and removing cards whenever possible.
- If plans change, update the schedule and explain what will happen instead.
- Adapt the number of cards, pictures, and activities to the person's preferences and communication needs.



Reading



Math



Writing



Science

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Speech



OT



PT



Art

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Bathroom



Morning Meeting



Read Aloud



File Folders

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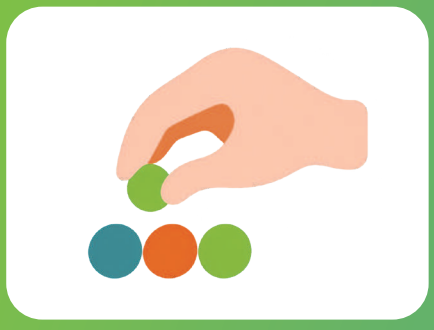
Independent Work



Clean Up



Story Time



Fine Motor

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Wash Hands



Gross Motor



ABA Therapy



Sensory

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Calm Down



Plan Change



Wait



All Done

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Break



Help



Choice Time



Going Home

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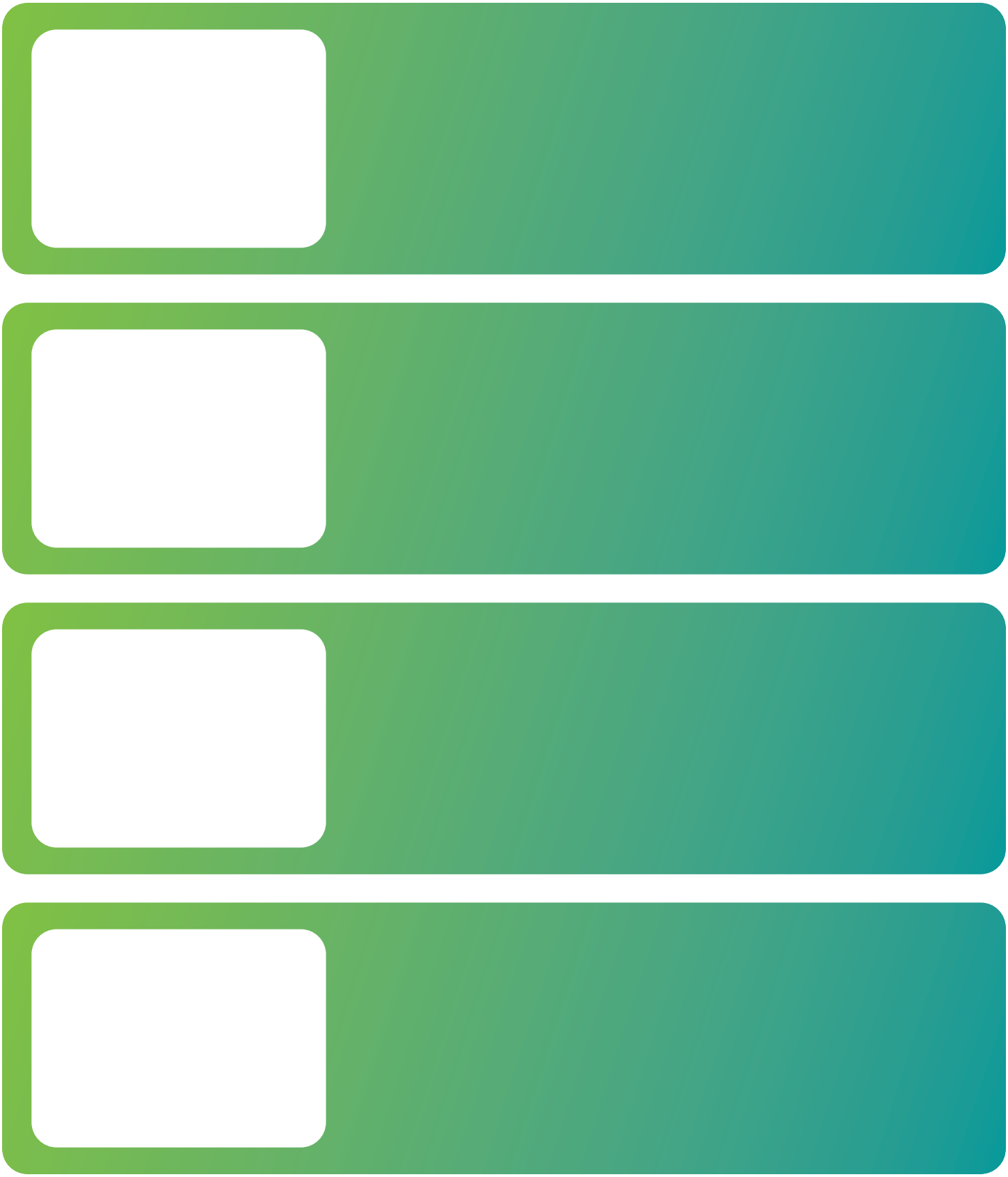

FIRST

Affix Card Here

THEN

Affix Card Here

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