

Chess in Education

"And lastly, we learn by chess the habit of not being discouraged by present bad appearances in the state of our affairs; the habit of hoping for a favorable chance, and that of preserving in the search of resources." -Benjamin Franklin, *"The Morals of Chess"*

Chess and School Education

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Part 1: Kids love Chess



If you are a kid, you already knew that. It's a no-brainer. If you are a parent or teacher, you might be surprised.

But it's true. Boys and girls really like chess. And not just a little bit, but a lot. Most kids like chess because it is both fun and challenging. Chess is easy to learn, and there is always room for growth. Of course winning a chess game is great, but losing also has its rewards.

However, don't just take my word for it. I asked a group of eighth grade girls at a school in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City recently to tell me what they liked about chess. Here is what they had to say...

Stacy said, "I like chess mostly because it is a skillful game of thought and strategy. Chess is fun to play, and I think every game is a learning experience."



Andrea said she also liked figuring out chess strategies, adding that she thought chess was especially good for, "... hard thinking and planning." She went on to say that, "What I like most about chess, though, is the chances that come up in most games for cleverness."

Lindsay said that what she liked most about chess is the way that it, "... forces you to look into the future when you are playing a game so that you can try to figure out what your partner is trying to do."

So, there you have it, the words of the experts. But maybe you have something you would like to add. Here is your big chance... What do you like most about chess?

Part 2: What chess teaches

If you play chess often as a school activity or as hobby at home; you already know how fun it can be. But chess also has many lessons to teach those who play it. Most kids who play chess already know that, and probably would not mind telling you how they have found that to be true for themselves if you asked them.



Try it. Next time you see some kids playing a chess game, ask them (after the game is over, of course!) to tell you what lessons chess has taught them. The answers will probably impress and astound you.

Recently, I asked a group of eighth graders at an all-girl school in East Harlem (part of New York City) what they had learned from playing chess. I think they gave some really good answers. But you should judge for yourself...

Francis said, "My chess games are usually very fun and exciting and no two games I play are ever exactly alike. They are unique. That tells me a lot about myself... I am a fun, exciting, unique person."

Megan said that chess had taught her to, "... really focus and be determined to accomplish things in my life, sort of like in a chess game. And to be a winner and not a loser, but if I lose to try again."

Elizabeth said that playing chess had taught her to look at herself in a different way. "Sometimes I bring out my strong pieces first, when I feel sure of myself. Other times I keep them back and play more carefully, when I am less sure of myself."

Christine said, "In chess and in life you have to think about your actions. Where are they leading to? What are the consequences? For example, in chess you have to protect your king, or you will lose. In life that has taught me to protect the things that are important to me."

Have you ever thought about the lessons you have learned from playing chess? Think about them and write them down on a piece of paper. Challenge yourself to add to the list whenever you play.

Part 3: For parents and teachers

Most of you with children or students who are avid chess players are well-aware that chess is good for kids. You have seen it with your own eyes...

Rambunctious children learn to settle down at the chess board. Students with short attention spans are able to focus on the challenges afforded by the game. Planning ahead, problem-solving, follow-thru, visualization skills are all essential to the game, and in time, you have seen your child, your student acquire these skills. The success stories out there are many, and quite frankly, the failures are few.



But those are stories. Have any studies shown chess to be a beneficial undertaking for your child or student?

The answer is a resounding, YES.

Several studies have shown that students who play chess as a school-related activity consistently score appreciably higher than non-chess students on intelligence tests. Very often this translates into better grades in math and reading.

Why? The same skills required to play a good game of chess are required to do well in the classical school subjects. Trial and error, hypothesizing, deducing, logical reasoning, judgment.

One very good study, THE EFFECT OF CHESS INSTRUCTION ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, written in 1999 by Speeth and Margulies of Columbia University summarized the benefits of chess for students this way:

"... chess instruction and chess play develop the attitudes and insights that make up emotional intelligence. Chess students must learn how to keep calm under pressure. The best strategy is to keep on trying even if the position looks bad. Chessplayers feel they can win if they work at it. They build confidence about their ability to tackle obstacles and succeed."

Part 4: Chess and Culture

What is chess? The very question is as old as the game itself, though it often appears in a variety of forms...Is chess really only a game, like monopoly or checkers? Is it an art, like painting or sculpture? Or a sport, like soccer or baseball? Or maybe even a science, like math or physics?

And the answer to the question, what is chess? Who can say, for like the question, the answer to the question also takes on many shapes and forms. Perhaps there are as many different answers to the question as there are chess players. Perhaps it is for each player to answer the question for him or herself. Perhaps...

In the earliest beginnings of the game, it seems that chess was not a game at all, but rather a way to predict the future, or to learn of the unknown and the unknowable. Ancient warlords arrayed their armies across the board and rolled dice to determine how their warriors would maneuver. Will we win as we face our enemies on the field of battle this day? or, Will we taste the bitterness of defeat?

In time, generals and kings came to rely upon other means in battle, and the kind of fate that dice offered on the chess board fell into disfavor. Skill and subterfuge and preparedness were the tools of the modern man who would face an enemy, and chess games to reflect this change in the thinking of people. Chess became a game.

During the Middle Ages in Spain and Italy, men skillful in "the art of play" studied chess all day and night, seeking out the truths that the diligent soul might find there. Some kept secret notebooks about openings and combinations and techniques useful for the endgame. Others sold books about their findings. A smaller number were even given salaries by wealthy patrons who relished the game enough to do so. In France, some artists supplemented their modest incomes by playing the well-to-do "forges" in the cafes, which served as natural gathering places for philosophers, writers, politicians, craftsmen, and the like.

In modern times, the question arises again, for it will not go away... What is chess?

A war game, some say, plain and simple. A game about aggression and struggle and survival and conquest. A game whereby one may express anger and disgust and contempt for one's opposers in a moderate and culturally acceptable manner.

A puzzle, some say. A very complicated puzzle that shifts and changes the very moment one reaches out to "insert another piece of the puzzle" as it were. A puzzle that someone else is trying to solve before you do. A puzzle that seems to matter more than other puzzles to those who would attempt to devise a solution.

It's a job, others say. It is the way to make a living if you are good at it, and there are some who are able to make a living by playing this game. But it is a difficult thing to do, and the living at best is rather modest at best, and even to do that, one usually has to be quite good at the game, and very committed to constant improvement. Bobby Fischer was able to do it, and Garry Kasparov, but they are grandmasters. Others do well enough as teachers. A few number as writers.

It's a sport, is a common responses. In Russia it is as popular as other sports, almost like soccer. Physical preparation for important match play was always considered crucial under the Soviet system. Kasparov is well known for the time each day he spends exercising during his game preparation, though interestingly Kramnik (Kasparov's successor) is known for this less so. Try playing an important game well when tired or hungry or worried. It is almost impossible.

Others say chess is an art, or it is art. Marcel Duchamp, the creator of the Dada movement in art, and who some would argue was the premier artist of the 20th century, certainly thought so. Players like Nimzowitsch and Reti' and others of the so-called hypermodern school were their heroes. These were the players who were interested in "creating" on the chessboard. They liked interesting games and interesting positions. They were sometimes (and still are, for there there are players like them still out there) accused of playing "anti-chess", of playing the kind of chess that flies into the face of reason and says, "ha!". In his later years, Duchamp even gave up "regular" art altogether. He then only pursued chess.

Still others say that chess is a metaphor for life. Vladimir Nabakov wrote a book about a chess player called "The Defense". William Faulkner wrote a book called "Knight's Gambit". Neither book is really about chess, but both books are about life with all its twists and turns and permutations. Ingmar Bergman's great film "The Seventh Seal" features a famous chess game, and the underlying story is about the deep, immensely important struggle that is human existence. Even the popular Hollywood film "Searching for Bobby Fischer", a favorite among kids, is not so much about chess, as it is about life is sort of like chess.

Me, I like to think that chess is the only game about everything. It's the only game that I know of that is about the real world. It is not a totally "made up game" like so many other games. Chess is a real game. All the struggles of real life are there -- politics, class struggle, gender issues, religion, survival.

I like this game a lot. I suppose that I will play it for the rest of my life. Maybe we can play sometime. When we do, I will shake your hand and wish you well. I hope you then play well, my friend. I know that I will, or I will at least certainly try.

by Gary Ryan