

CHESS MAKES KIDS SMART

By Anne Graham

And, indeed, it really may. Read on.

“My dad got me interested in chess about one or two years ago,” seven-year-old Elian Levatino of Germantown, Tennessee, relates. “I started getting to be good at it, and now I’m teaching a younger friend of mine who is in kindergarten and some other people at my school. I also went back and taught my dad everything I know.”

It’s not as big as Little League or ballet classes, but for many youngsters like Elian (who says he plays about ten games a day), chess is “neat,” “fun,” and “better than baseball.” And even non-chess-playing parents seem to like what happens when kids and chess are introduced.

Beckie and Rick Levatino, Elians parents, first bought him a chess set two years ago when he was five. “Elian was having some problems in his Montessori school,” Beckie relates. “I went to observe--they have the two-way mirrors--and saw that he rushed through the math and language-arts activities, trying always to be the first one to finish. I had also noticed that at home Elian seemed to be fascinated by the game shows on television, where the contestants are frantic to beat the clock I thought there might be some kind of connection.”

Beckie Levatino also observed that in another section of the school, some children were allowed to go into a hallway and play a quiet game-checkers. “It occurred to me that checkers might slow down Elian a little, and we tried it with him. He played for a couple of weeks and seemed to like it well enough. But it wasn't until we bought the chess set and Rick showed him how to play that he changed his whole *modus operandi*.

“Elian realized immediately that it was going to take longer for him to play this game,” his mother says. “There are a lot of things to think about. And Elian, who had never liked to play any game he couldn't win, lost a lot of games. Still, he continued to play. It was just a challenge. We feel chess has helped him immeasurably, especially in learning how to slow down and concentrate on one thing.”



How to learn.

Chess has been challenging kids and adults all over the world for several centuries. Despite the game's image as a pastime for “brains,” it is easy to learn. Most six- and seven-year-olds kids can pick up the basic rules quickly, and a few children learn to play as young as four.

Families get turned on to chess almost by accident in some instances. Mike Miller of Norfolk, Virginia, says his two boys picked up the game by reading the back of a cereal box'. “They didn't quite have all the moves straight,” he recalls, “so I helped them. I had played a little in high school, and when the boys started playing a lot, I got interested again. Shortly after that, my wife, Sue, got involved. We all play ‘now.’”

Dr. Dianne Horgan, a psychology professor at Memphis State University and mother of two young chess players, suggests that even parents who know nothing about the game can learn along with their children. “It can be fun for a parent and child to learn to play together,” she states. “There's no real reason for parents to think they have to be experts before they can sit down and play with their kids.”

Beginners first learn how the board should be turned (a white square in the bottom right corner) and the names of the pieces. Each player starts the game with sixteen chessmen: one king, one queen, two bishops, two knights, two rooks, and eight pawns. One set of pieces is white, the other set is black.

Learning how the pieces move and capture other pieces takes only a few minutes, although most beginners have to keep reminding themselves through the first few games. The objective is simply to checkmate the opposing king that is, to put the king in a position where he cannot escape capture.

Losses are inevitable at every level of play. Beginners competing against more experienced players can expect to lose hundreds of games, if they play enough. Players have to learn to accept losing and to concentrate on not making the same mistakes twice.



“You can't be put down when you lose,” says thirteen-year-old Noah Spaulding of Radford, Virginia “You just keep on trying.” A chess veteran, Noah compares the game to tennis. “if you talk to people who are chess masters, you can see what I mean,” he says. “Either you attack, or you STAY back and WAIT FOR the other person to' make a mistake. When I was trying to improve my game, I learned not to make so many mistakes, to wait for the other person to make a mistake.”

The hidden value.

The value of chess for children may be much more than entertainment and amusement. Many parents, teachers, researchers, and others are convinced that “Chess Makes Kids Smart” (a slogan coined by the United States Chess Federation) is much more than an empty public-relations promise.

Math teacher and chess-club sponsor Jan Brandt, a Richmond, Virginia, Mother of four, describes chess as “probably the best game there is for developing logical, precise thinking.” In Brandt's view, chess also helps to encourage patience, sharp memory, the ability to concentrate, problem solving skills, and the understanding that certain behaviors carry certain consequences,

Pete Shaw, a computer-science teacher, has taught hundreds of kids in Pulaski, Virginia, to play chess. “It's like turning on switches in their heads,” he says. “You feel as though you can watch the brain working through a window. The game demands both inductive and deductive reasoning. You see the kid looking at a problem, breaking it down, then putting the whole thing back together. The process involves recall, analysis, judgment, and abstract reasoning.”

A link between mathematics skills and chess skills has been suggested by some researchers in this field. Jeffrey Chesin, who teaches inner-city kids in Philadelphia, agrees that the thought processes in math and chess are similar. “But that’s not the whole story,” he adds. “Youngsters who are good in chess will probably be good in math or in any problem-solving situation,” Chesin says, “but kids who excel in math will not necessarily be good chess players.”



Children do not have to be particularly bright to enjoy chess. Chesin maintains. “The majority of the kids I work with would be considered ‘average.’ Some are below average. But they get interested, and they work hard at it. Determination is definitely a factor.”

“Chess should be played creatively,” Lubomir Kavalek of Reston, Virginia, maintains. Kavalek, one of the world’s top players, believes that “while there is obviously a certain logic one should follow, there is room for intuition and fantasy, for original thought, for taking each situation as it comes, rather than always relying on particular rules.”

Clubs and tournaments.

In some sections of the country, chess booms because of well-organized clubs. Adults who believe in chess and what it does for kids have worked to provide opportunities even for kindergarten students to team and play the game. While teachers are often the chess instructors and sponsors, many times parents or other adults assume part or all of the responsibilities.

Bob Cotter, an elementary-school teacher in Indianapolis, took his team of inner-city kids to a national chess tournament in 1983. “After we won the championship, the kids met President Reagan, traveled to Japan, and received all kinds of recognition.”

Cotter began his program as an after-school learning activity “because these kids didn’t have anything else.” He believes playing chess has helped the youngsters not only academically, but socially. “For one thing, they see that it doesn’t matter where you come from; if you set a goal and never lose sight of it, you can attain it.”

Although Cotter’s winning team members are all black and all male, he’s convinced there is no difference in the chess potential of girls and boys. “At some point, I’d like to take a team of girls and win the national championship,” he says.



Different kinds of players

Some adults involved in the game say that while boys and girls are probably equal in overall chess-playing abilities, boys may excel in spatial tasks (which are a part of chess). Girls, on the other hand, may be more intuitive and creative. Although men have historically dominated the game, females of all ages seem to be playing now. Both sexes seemed to be about equally represented at many scholastic tournaments.

Children with special problems can also learn chess. Teacher Pete Shaw sees the game as away for emotionally disturbed children to learn and practice self-control. “I preach to them that the mind must control the body. If you don’t follow the rules and control yourself, you lose. When there is a teacher or someone to continue reinforcing the concepts, chess works.”

With mentally retarded children, Shaw stresses concentration and pattern recognition. “In my mind, all education is about learning to see and break down patterns. Chess gives these kids concrete examples of how to do this. It also helps to increase their attention span.”

Not every child will like chess. Pete Shaw, who says his primary interest is educating children, encourages parents who may be considering chess as an appropriate activity “just to think about whether it would be good for the child. It’s only what chess can do for the child that’s important. We don’t play chess for the sake of chess, but for the sake of the child.”

At its highest levels, chess is a game of limitless complexity and depth. But the beauty of the game is that players at almost any level enjoy its surprises and challenges. The more one plays and learns about the game, the more absorbing it becomes, Chess players are often hooked for life.

