

CHESS COACHING FOR THE YOUNGER CHILD

I guess that one of the greatest fear amongst league or tournament players is that of being trounced by some small boy {or worse, girl} whose diminutive features barely allow you see their head above the top of the table, and amongst whose noisy, sticky-fingered, crisp-eating habits is the somewhat incongruous but exceedingly objectionable one of unfailingly making the right piece to the right place at the right time. Contrary to what some of our number might think, however, there is a great deal of pleasure to be had from teaching the little blighters to play the game in the first place.

The group with whom I first worked were mostly in the range six to nine, occasionally down to four or up to eleven, and were part of a club where chess is offered as one of a number of activities rather than being the sole purpose for which the club is convened, It is to my experience with this younger age bracket and more general community that the following relates; the group is non-typical only in that it contains an unusually high proportion of extremely bright children, thereby enabling me to attempt things at an age which might not otherwise be feasible. For the average child, the reader may care to augment my age figures by a year or so.

Six is the youngest age at which I expect chess, even for quite an intelligent child, to be viable. At five I would start showing the move and gauge the reaction; if it were not favourable, I would immediately transpose to a game which was similar in nature but had simpler rules. Draughts is ideal for this purpose, and feasible down to five; at four I prefer fox-and-goose, in which four ordinary draughtsmen {geese} have to stifle one king {fox}, captures not being permitted. By all means attempt to introduce any of these games early, but if the child is not up to it do not prolong the experiment or put him under any pressure; just be patient, and have another shot in a few months' time.

One of the first things to decide is the overall approach; how to overcome the disparity between your own game and that of the child, in such a way that he can have an enjoyable and instructive time. One possibility is that you smash him out of sight and hopes that he learns something, which is a fairly sure way of putting him off the game for life. Another is to deliberately play badly yourself and give him a chance to capitalise on it if he notices; this also is not a good idea, since he will assume your own habits are good and start imitating them. If you deliberately leave pieces en pris, it is rather difficult to explain to the child why he shouldn't.

Occasionally seen is the piece based handicap, whereby the adult starts short of, typically, a knight and/or rook; however, this gives the child an unrealistic environment to work in and I do not like it. For the adult too, it means loss of control; he has not the power to demonstrate things, and all he can do is to sit there and wait for the child to blunder. More satisfactory from a theoretical point of view is the time-handicap, but unfortunately this does not work either; the child will grasp the concept of the clock all right, but you will not be able to stop him responding to your tempo. Thus, if you give yourself two minutes and the child half an hour, for example, you will find yourself playing a genuine blitz game which the child will happily lose with 28 of his 30 minutes still remaining. It also doesn't give you any time to explain anything mid-game.

My favoured method is to play a realistic game in which the child is allowed to take back his last move as and when he wishes; if it is dubious we discuss the likely consequences, at the end of which I ask him whether he still wants to proceed with it. If he does I let him, for better or worse. By offering repeated options you can control the relative states of the sides, and by selecting the best of the alternatives explained to him the child can obtain a position which is not, to the casual observer, far from quality; to the extent, perhaps, that you go into an endgame just a pawn and a minor positional advantage to the good.

I will speak more of endgames in a subsequent article, but the take-back method has several reasons to recommend it. Firstly, it gives the child the impression that he is doing quite well, and thus builds his morale; secondly, the relative elimination of error means that the positions tend to be more realistic; thirdly, the child is given the chance to sample more different stages of the game than if he were just wiped out in the opening; and finally, believe it or not, it gives the adult sufficiently meagre an advantage that he is able to enjoy the game on his own account.

Hand-in-hand with take-back goes the switch, the consent of which is that, having obtained a lost position the child does not resign but, if and only he concedes that it is lost, he is allowed the option of turning the board round and playing with the adult's pieces. It gives him the experience of good endgame positions which he would not otherwise enjoy, and teaches him out to mate, which beginners tend to be notoriously bad at. Also, the fact that it will probably be he who administers mate, however obtained, will be an enormous boost to his confidence. I will remark here that I am only human and that the temptation to try and win a switched game by cutting back on take-back offers is enormous. I have done it, but usually the positions are so grotty as to be past hope; the child is typically a queen up in an endgame and sometimes more.

Having resolved the technique, the next issues to address are duration and pace. The former resolves itself; you have to be alive to each individual's level of ability and concentration, and respond accordingly. In general concentration increases with age; at five, two or three minutes non-tactical moving of the pieces may be the maximum, whereas an enthusiastic eight or nine year old may be good for twenty to thirty minutes or more. Competition games for this age tend to be set at about thirty minutes a side, with an expectancy that very few games will go anywhere near the distance; at casual level, with young beginners the golden rule is to let them quit when they want to and make them feel welcome to come back next week. Not infrequently you have to quit out for them, if they go off the boil; that is, if they just sit there taking increasingly little notice, it is better for all if you can persuade them to do something else.

With regards to pace, the average child's preference is to play fairly fast but not excessively so. He will certainly take a dim view of you if you go into three-hour league mode, but it is acceptable to stop short of complete blitz pace and settle for fast quick-play rate; generally, if you go at about the child's own pace you should be all right. It is better to make a weak move rather than to risk him getting bored; he probably won't recognise it as such, and even if he does you will probably have plenty of chances to take remedial action. If it does come to the worst and after several moves you look like being a piece down you can always cut down on take-back offers until you have recouped.

One of the beauties of teaching children of this age is that they are still so full of natural enthusiasm; another is that you don't need, with people who are just being introduced to the game, to be an exceptionally strong player yourself. Don't worry if you haven't got a grading of 220; in the early stages 90 or 100 will probably do. If you do commit a blunder, the best policy is to be honest about it; typically, I give the child one move to exploit it and then if he misses it, show him what he might have done. This being very honest also has one valuable side-effect; it builds the child's confidence by reminding him that you are human and beatable.

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My first article dealt with overall technique; before moving on to the more specific traits of chess amongst the very young, it is well to remember that there is also an element of sportsmanship involved. The game has an image of being a boring activity in which the contestants sit around doing nothing, and yet here you are trying to persuade vivacious youngster that it is a fun thing to do, worthy for consideration for their attention alongside all the other hobbies which they mostly

won't have time to pursue. In short, you are in competition; you have to tickle the child's fancy to the extent that, in later life if not immediately, his overall feeling towards the game will be one of pleasure.

You won't do that by sitting stony-faced shoving around pieces. The average child of six to nine does not take life too seriously, and as likely as not is brought up on computer games where captures are marked by excited audio and visual effects. It is therefore incumbent upon you to provide these, where you sense that the child is temperamentally thus inclined. The ability to manufacture facetious dirges in A-flat minor is not a talent universally possessed, but a gunshot or bomb homing in are within most people's capabilities; accompany this by a hand slowly descending from the heavens, and you will often have the child laughing.

The capture undoubtedly offers the most potential for the injection of humour, and it is always desirable to effect it slowly so as to prolong its contemplation. One has to be innovative in the variety of ways in which one does it, and in the language which you use to discuss it. With some of your clientele you might eat or gobble their piece rather than taking it, occasionally backing this up with an exaggerated swallowing sound at the moment of removal; with another you might zap it or bop it, and so on. With some children, these simple synonyms have an enormous effect. One method of dealing with people who leave things en pris is to take one's own piece which would make the capture, tap the enemy piece on the head with it, then replace it on the original square to see what the reaction is. Generally, long-distance captures offer more potential; it is difficult to make PxP exciting, but the intentions of a fianchettoed bishop gliding slowly down the long diagonal can be seen and appreciated for several seconds before it actually reaches the enemy rook.

Where the loss is of a combinative nature rather than leaving something en pris, it is best to forego the humour and work through the sequence, provided that the latter is obvious, and then having got the child to weigh up the respective gains of the two sides, offer a takeback; for this, the well-known approximation, $Q=9P$, $R=5P$, $B=N=3P$ is a useful thing to teach them. If there are equal options which are all bad, or if the position is uncertain, the amount of explanation involved will probably confuse the child; in which case, it is best to let him choose one without comment.

Amongst the less experienced of the very young, three weaknesses appear again and again: a predilection for flank pawn openings, a tendency to sacrifice material for no good reason, and the repeated use of one hyperactive piece. All are interesting traits and worthy of further discussion.

Many children fail at first to realise that centre pawn moves are best and they therefore pick at random. P-KR4 is singularly popular, probably because, most of them being right-handed, the KRP is the first one they reach. Takeback cannot be used with long-term potential weaknesses, and the only thing for it is to go through the motions of smashing up the kingside with a view to demonstrating that 1. P-KR4 is not a good idea. If the child combines the move with P-KB3, which is also quite frequent, you should be able to get the game over sufficiently quickly to convince the waiting queue that your opponent didn't really get much of a game and that therefore you will give him another one.

In contrast to the flankers' brazen combination of P-R4, P-KN4, P-KB3 in front of uncastled king, those children who have an intuitive sense of the value of the centre tend to be decidedly timid and defensive; P-Q3, P-K3, B-K2, B-Q2 is the sort of sequence sometimes seen. The adult grabs the space and rewards the child for his discretion by grabbing a strong positional plus.

The kamikaze sacrificers derive from a subset of children whose first need, above all else, is to hear and feel the clatter of pieces. They tend to move fast, they never decline a swap, and they have to have an enemy bit in their hands every two or three moves. They do at least usually attack in the

centre, because they know that that is the way to get quick action, but the trouble is that, having exhausted the obvious pawn exchanges, they then start hacking off other pawns with their minor pieces in order to ensure that a constant stream of enemy wood/plastic comes flowing in. There is very little you can do about this category of player. Takebacks won't work because your generosity will be declined; after listening to the economic arguments against giving up a knight for a pawn, your opponent will still want to go ahead with it. If you have got any more pawns on offer, he will probably do it again the very next go.

The best approach to a hyperactive piece, usually a Q or N but occasionally a rook developed via R3, is to chase it all round the place in such a manner that will also further your development; then, point out later the reason why your opponent was caught cramped and undeveloped. As with the flank pawns, the failing has to be demonstrated by example. If P-R4 does come on either flank, I line up the appropriate bishop and warn of what R-R3 might bring.

So much for the child's manner of opening; what about your own? Firstly it must be said: do not succumb to the temptation to use weak opposition for experimentation of your own, since children have marvellous powers of observation and imitation and are likely to reproduce anything bizarre which you do. Keep to the straight and narrow, conforming to good general policy; specifically avoid openings which are used for variety only, and/or which appear to introduce one or more of the three aforementioned habits which you are always trying to cure. For example, it is not wonderfully clever if, having walked off with a lecture on the evils of flank pawn openings ringing in his ear, the child comes back five minutes later and find you freshly embarked on the Grob; or if, having been persuaded with great difficulty to cease suicidal attacks and concentrate on development, he catches you attempting the Wilkes-Barre for the first time in your life. Indeed, all forms of gambit should be avoided, unless they show an almost immediate return; as also Alekhine's defence. There is nothing actually wrong with some of these forbidden openings, but it is not helpful to release them on a player until he is mature enough to appreciate the thinking behind them.

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In adult chess you can mate, stalemate, resign, default, agree a draw or claim under one of the 50-move, repetition, perpetual check or lack of mating material rules. In young children's chess there is one further situation which is met, which I suppose the 50-move rule would cover if you were there for long enough; that where one side has an overwhelming advantage, but hasn't a clue what to do with it. Tournament adjudicators usually give it as a draw.

To understand this phenomenon one has only to watch a couple of six-year-olds playing the endgame K,Q versus K. Very frequently the owner of the queen will forget that his king is an active piece and be content to meander round checking until eternity; after a while, he will put the queen somewhere where it can be taken and the game will fizzle out as a draw. The idea of co-ordination between the pieces is not there and needs to be developed.

I haven't yet worked out what I am going to do with two six-year-olds who present me with K,B, N versus K. The one with the sole K wouldn't accept that it was a defeat unless he saw it proved, and would complain that I was giving unfair assistance to his opponent if I attempted to; apart from which, I know that there is at least one of my club colleagues who doesn't believe I could do it anyway, because he once made me try it!

Children are surprisingly adept, at an early age, of recognising a lost position when they see one. Indeed, this can be one reason why concentration appears to fade; they are not fed up, they just realise in the late middle game that the positional advantage has gone away from them and that

there is nowhere to go. One or two of them even resign, correctly, at such a stage with quite a large number of pieces on the board, if the situation warrants it.

If you teach children to offer draws they will not infrequently try you for one in failing positions, just like adults do, although it is rare for them to offer them in equal positions. Most children's draws result from stalemates of one description or the other, particularly the variety where the contestants have reduced each other to a king apiece; the idea of settling for anything less than a full point when you still have a decent amount of material available just doesn't occur to them. I once arrived during the penultimate round of a tournament in which my own eight-year-old was playing, to find that his performance was exciting some suspicion; four draws out of five at that age just doesn't normally happen. His fifth round opponent spoilt the pattern by letting him get fools' mate, but it was back on target with a fifth draw, total 3½ out of six, in the final round. He was obviously intended to be a diplomat.

Be prepared, every now and again, for a surprise. Put a piece en pris and ninety-nine times out of a hundred you will get it back; do it to one of the more talented eight-year-olds when he's having an on-day and, just occasionally, you might not. One day I offered a take back to an eleven-year-old who had just put his QNP en pris, well aware that if I did take it the deflection of my knight would lay me open to an attack which, whilst probably unsound, would have been a good adventurous try worthy of an adult friendly. The boy politely but firmly declined on the instant; I deliberately took the pawn, whereupon said attack followed, executed very creditably.

Most parents are appreciative of your efforts to stimulate their child and, especially if they regard their own prowess at the game as somewhat moderate, will often sit down alongside looking interestedly. If they do so, let them, they may be genuinely keen to pick up the tactics themselves. I only once got myself into trouble. Playing an eight-year-old I made a take-back offer, which was accepted; notwithstanding, the lad went on and lost. The father, who had been playing another child on the adjacent board, then laid into me saying that I had talked his son out of a win, and insisted on spending the next half-hour justifying his position. I don't know to this day who he was, but he claimed that "though he nowadays only played his son, he had formerly played the game at the highest level". Needless to say, I wasn't allowed to give anybody's children much more attention that afternoon.

One very common feature amongst very intelligent children is hyperactivity. If your opponent's choice of excessive body movement is to kick you under the kneecap every ten seconds, as is the case if he insists on swinging his feet, your choice of play can be influenced. I once had an opponent leave his queen en pris, and was debating the relative merits of takeback and teach-by-example when the next toecap came thudding in to decide for me. If you move your legs out of the way you may get kicked somewhere higher, and you don't exactly want to play chess wearing cricket pads and a box!

Losing chess is a good way of persuading a child to stay at the board when you have completed one game of the real thing and perceive that his attention will not run to another; it has a ready appeal because of its humour, its quickfire action and the frequent appeal of captured pieces. It is an excellent form of light relief and promotes the concept of movement and coordination of the pieces. I do not, however, normally attempt it with anyone unless they are reasonably proficient at the main game, nor do I offer it as a first choice over the main game unless specifically requested.

Finally, it is wise for both parents and coaches to keep a rein on their own ambition. We all want our children to do well, but I have known at least one coach encourage aggression as a positive quality. The will to win is good, but chess like other competitive activities is only one aspect of a child's emerging life and there has to be balance; far better to be a happy, well-balanced child who

enjoys his game, than a whiz-kid or a misfit who wins all his tournaments. Parents, too; it is a revelation to listen to the conversation of the front-runners' parents at junior tournaments! not for nothing do they keep them away from the board. I was once playing a very good tournament-experienced eight-year-old in a friendly when he left a bishop en pris against me. I offered him a take-back. His father looked up from his own game on the next board, told him off sharply for doing so, and promptly resumed his own game. I felt for the lad; I knew he was able to work that out for himself, without anyone rubbing it in. Eight years later he was keeping his father's enthusiasm at bay by telling him that he couldn't turn out for first-team league games because he needed to knuckle down and work for his A-levels; whereas, with most teenagers, I recall that the tale is the other way round.

Encourage, be patient with failings and diversions, and enjoy the game together.