

Why Chess?

Chess is one of the most powerful educational tools available to strengthen a child's mind. Chess can enhance concentration, patience and perseverance as well as develop creativity, intuition, memory, and importantly, the ability to analyze and deduce from a set of general principles while learning to make tough decisions and solve problems flexibly.

Playing chess requires intense concentration. For young players, chess teaches the rewards of concentration as well as providing immediate penalties for concentration lapses. Few teaching tools provide such quick feedback. A slip in concentration can lead to a simple blunder, perhaps even ending the game. Only, a focused, patient and persistent child will maintain steady results – characteristics that are equally valuable for performing well at school, especially in school exams.

The internet, email and computers are rapidly changing the skills essential to succeed at school and work. As globalization accelerates, information is pouring in faster and faster. Information that took months to track down a few years ago can now spin off the internet in just seconds. With such easy access and tremendous volumes, the ability to choose effectively among a wide variety of options is ever more vital. Students must increasingly be able to respond flexibly and critically. They must be able to wade through and synthesize vast amounts of information, not just memorize chunks of it. They must learn to recognize what is relevant and what is irrelevant. They also need to acquire the skills to be able to learn new technologies quickly as well as solve a continual stream of problems with these new technologies.

This is where chess as a tool to develop the minds of children appears to be especially powerful. By its very nature chess presents an ever-changing set of problems. Except for the very beginning of the game, where it is possible to memorize opening moves, each move creates a new position. For each of these, a player tries to find the “best” move by calculating ahead, evaluating these future possibilities using a set of theoretical principles.

These thinking skills are becoming ever more valuable for primary and secondary school students constantly confronted with new everyday problems. If these students go on to college, it will be especially imperative to understand how to apply broad principles to assess new situations critically, rather than rely on absorbing a large number of “answers.”

Chess is an especially effective teaching tool. It can equally challenge the minds of girls and boys, gifted and average students, athletic and non-athletic, rich and poor. It can teach children the importance of planning and the consequences of decisions. It can further teach how to concentrate, how to win and lose gracefully, how to think logically and efficiently, and how to make tough and abstract decisions. Chess can also build confidence and self-esteem without over-inflating egos, as some losses are inevitable, even for world champions. Chess can potentially help teach underachieving children how to study, perhaps even leaving them with a passion for learning.

Perhaps most importantly, chess is an effective way to teach children how to think and solve an ever-changing and diverse array of difficult problems. With millions of possibilities in every game, players must continually face new positions and new problems. They cannot solve these using a simple formula or relying on memorized answers. Instead, they must analyze and calculate relying on general principles and patterns along with a dose of creativity and originality – skills that increasingly mirror what students must confront in their everyday schoolwork.

Adapted from “The Case for Chess as a Tool to Develop Our Children’s Minds,” 2000, Dr. Peter Dauvergne. Dr. Dauvergne is the Canada Research Chair in Global Environmental Politics and an Associate Professor in the Political Science department at the University of British Columbia. He is a member of the Publications Board of the UBC Press and the founding and current editor of the MIT journal Global Environmental Politics.