

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN WITH CHESS

1. WHY CHESS?

(This section is extracted from "Why Offer Chess in Schools" by Jerry Meyers)

We have brought chess to the schools because we believe it directly contributes to academic performance. Chess makes kids smarter. It does so by teaching the following skills:

Focusing - Children are taught the benefits of observing carefully and concentrating. If they don't watch what is happening, they can't respond to it, no matter how smart they are.

Visualising - Children are prompted to imagine a sequence of actions before it happens. We actually strengthen the ability to visualise by training them to shift the pieces in their mind, first one, then several moves ahead.

Thinking Ahead - Children are taught to think first, then act. We teach them to ask themselves "If I do this, what might happen then, and how can I respond?" Over time, chess helps develop patience and thoughtfulness.

Weighing Options - Children are taught that they don't have to do the first thing that pops into their mind. They learn to identify alternatives and consider the pros and cons of various actions.

Analysing Concretely - Children learn to evaluate the results of specific actions and sequences. Does this sequence help me or hurt me? Decisions are better when guided by logic, rather than impulse.

Thinking Abstractly - Children are taught to step back periodically from details and consider the bigger picture. They also learn to take patterns used in one context and apply them to different, but related situations.

Planning - Children are taught to develop longer range goals and take steps toward bringing them about. They are also taught of the need to reevaluate their plans as new developments change the situation.

Juggling Multiple Considerations Simultaneously - Children are encouraged not to become overly absorbed in any one consideration, but to try to weigh various factors all at once.

None of these skills are specific to chess, but they are all part of the game. The beauty of chess as a teaching tool is that it stimulates children's minds and helps them to build these skills while enjoying themselves. As a result, children become more critical thinkers, better problem solvers, and more independent decision makers.

These conclusions have been backed up by educational research. Studies have been done in various locations around the United States and Canada, showing that chess results in increased scores on standardised tests for both reading and maths. A study on a large scale chess program in New York City, which involved more than 100 schools and 3,000 children, showed higher classroom grades in both English and Maths for children involved in chess.

In schools, chess often serves as a bridge, bringing together children of different ages, races and genders in an activity they can all enjoy.

Chess helps build individual friendships and also school spirit when children compete together as teams against other schools. Chess also teaches children about sportsmanship - how to win graciously and not give up when encountering defeat. Chess provides a positive social outlet, a wholesome recreational activity that can be easily learned and enjoyed at any age.

2. HOW TO HELP

Children who are enjoying learning about chess at school will no doubt want to be able to practice at home.

Our experience over teaching chess for more than 30 years shows that children who are getting constructive help from their parents at home get far more out of the game than those who are not.

Yet many parents don't feel confident that they know enough about chess to help their children. Others try to play with their children but end up passing on their own bad habits. Some simply don't have the time or the inclination to help.

3. LEARNING THE RULES

Are you confident about the exact rules of castling? Have you even heard of the *en passant* rule? Does it make any difference if you start with a white or a black square in the right hand corner? Do you call the pieces that start in the corner Rooks or Castles?

Your children will be learning the correct way to play chess at school. You can brush up on the rules by downloading our simple guide to the rules of chess from the Books section of chessKIDS academy (www.chesskids.com) or by completing the first two classes in the Kids' Zone.

4. PLAYING THE GAME

Here are a few tips which you might use when you play chess against your children.

- The first time you play, play with just your King and Pawns against your child's full army. If your child beats you, add a Knight before the next game. Continue to add pieces until you find a level which gives you an equal game.
- Make a few deliberate mistakes during the game to see if your child notices. You could try saying "Oh no! My last move was a mistake!" to provide a clue.
- When you reach an easily winning position change sides so that your child gets the winning position.
- Give your child the chance to turn the board round a set number of times in each game.
- Talk through the game, explaining your moves and giving your children a chance to explain their moves. You could say things like "I'll bring my Knight out – it's good to get Knights out early in the game" or "I'm threatening your Queen – which piece do you think you should move next?"

5. CHECKMATE ENDS THE GAME

Before you can play a real game of chess you must know EXACTLY what CHECKMATE means. You

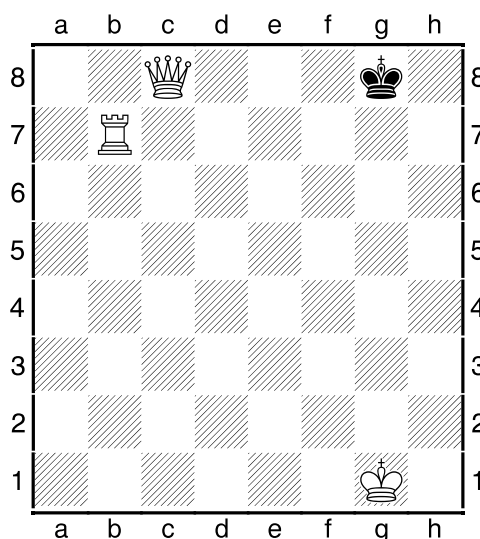
also need to know the difference between CHECK, CHECKMATE and STALEMATE.

All children should be able to recognise the most common CHECKMATE positions.

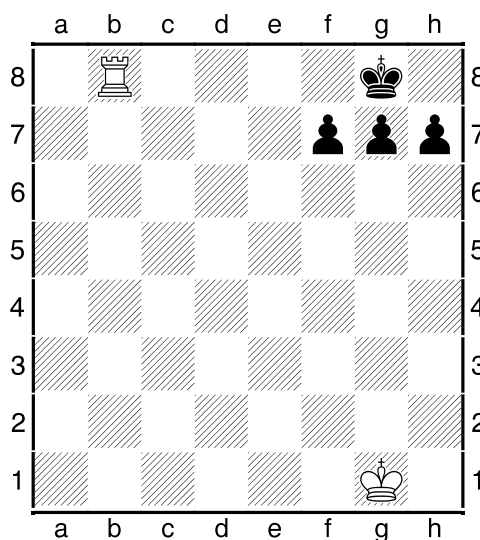
There are two types of CHECKMATE which occur most often.

The first one is a CHECKMATE on the side of the board with a Queen or Rook.

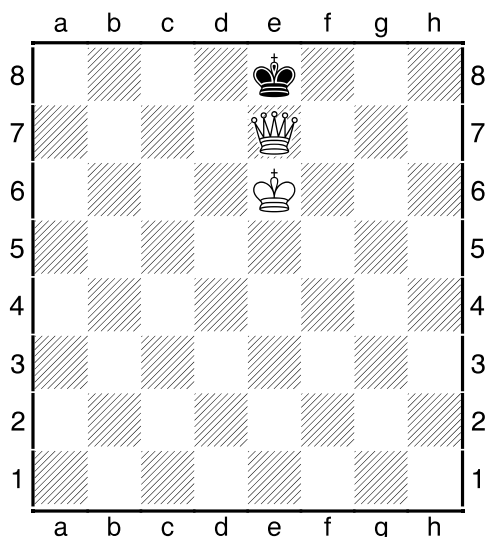
Here's one example, where a Rook stops the King escaping.



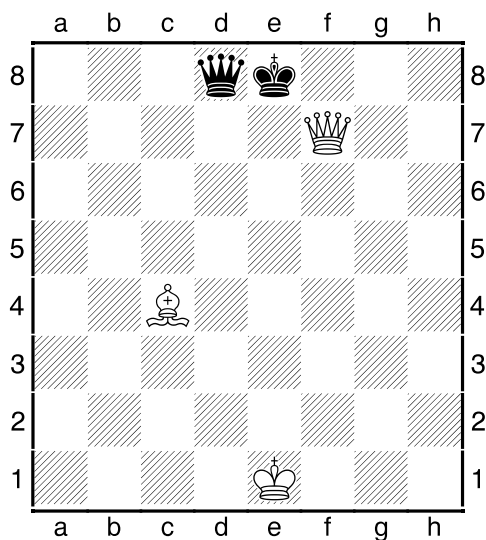
And here's another example, where the King's escape is blocked by his own Pawns.



The other type of CHECKMATE uses a Queen next to a King and defended by a friendly piece, as in this example.



Sometimes the Queen is one square diagonally away from the enemy King and his escape is blocked by another piece:



We recommend that children spend some time each week solving simple Mate in 1 move puzzles. Watch out for the Mating Machine coming shortly on chessKIDS academy.

6. SUPERIOR FORCE WINS

First of all you need to know the table of the values of the pieces:

PAWN	1 POINT
KNIGHT	3 POINTS
BISHOP	3 POINTS
ROOK	5 POINTS
QUEEN	9 POINTS

No value is assigned to the King because the Kings always remain on the board. (If you don't understand THAT the Kings always remain on the board, and WHY the Kings always remain on the board you have a problem!)

This is only a very rough guide. It slightly undervalues Bishops and Queens compared with other pieces. (Bishop plus Knight against Rook plus Pawn is usually a significant advantage.) Also, values can change during the game and are very much dependent on how the pieces are placed.

Having said that, in a game between two (club/tournament strength) players an advantage of just one point will often be enough to win and an advantage of two or more points almost always enough to win.

Children will often find it easy to learn the values without understanding their significance. Although a child will be able to tell me that a Knight is worth 3 points and a Rook 5 points they will refrain from exchanging a Knight for a Rook because they don't want to lose their Knight. One way to get round this problem is to ask the child if he/she would like to exchange £3 for £5. They usually understand this and can transfer this understanding to chess pieces.

You can reinforce your children's knowledge of the values of the pieces by asking how much a piece is worth when you move that piece.

7. ATTACKS, DEFENCES AND THREATS

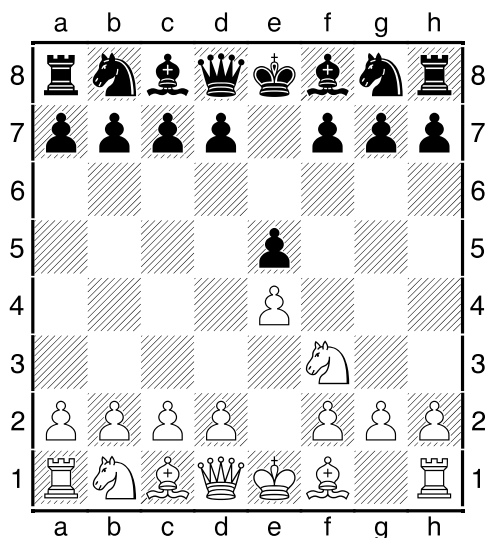
These concepts are the cornerstone of chess logic. Unless and until you understand these you can't approach playing good chess.

In its simplest terms a **THREAT** means a threat to deliver **CHECKMATE**, to capture a piece for nothing, or to capture a stronger piece with a weaker piece.

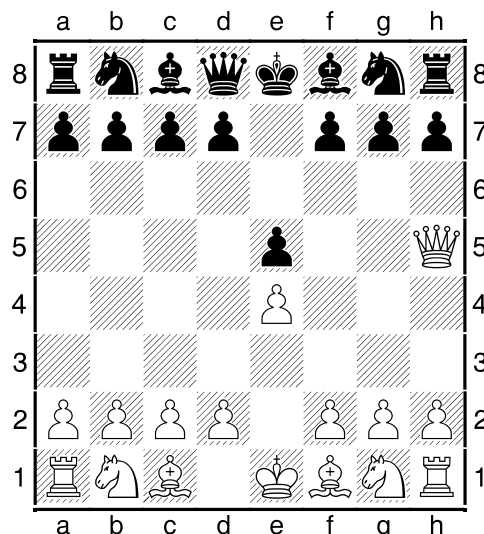
If your opponent's last move creates a **THREAT** you **MUST** either meet the **THREAT** or reply with an equal or greater **THREAT**.

A **THREAT** to win a piece can be **DEFENDED** in several ways: by moving the **THREATENED** piece to a safe square, by **DEFENDING** the **THREATENED** piece, by **CAPTURING** the piece creating the **THREAT** or by **BLOCKING** the **THREAT**.

Children can learn to understand **THREATS** by considering the simple game of Noughts and Crosses. Here, if you create a **THREAT** your opponent should block it. If you create a **DOUBLE THREAT** you will win the game. This idea, at a much higher level, is what chess is all about.

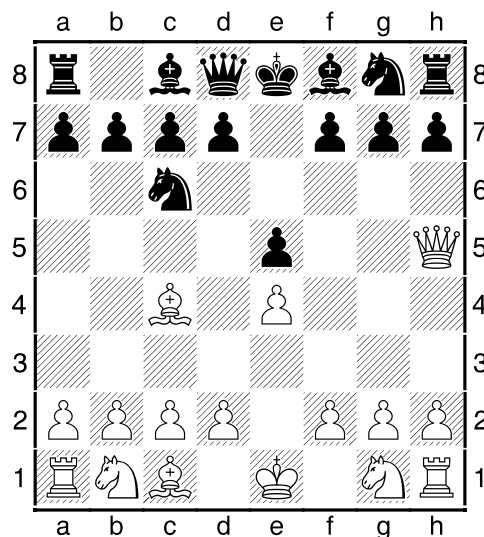


In this position White has just moved his **KNIGHT** to **ATTACK** the undefended Black Pawn on e5. This is a **THREAT**. Black **MUST** either **DEFEND** the **THREATENED** Pawn (for instance by moving his Knight from b8 to c6, or by moving his Pawn from d7 to d6) or create a **THREAT** himself (for instance by moving his Knight from g8 to f6).



In this position White's Queen **ATTACKS** three Pawns: on e5, f7 and h7. The Pawns on f7 and h7 are both **DEFENDED** but the Pawn on e5 is not. So again Black needs to **DEFEND** the Pawn on e5.

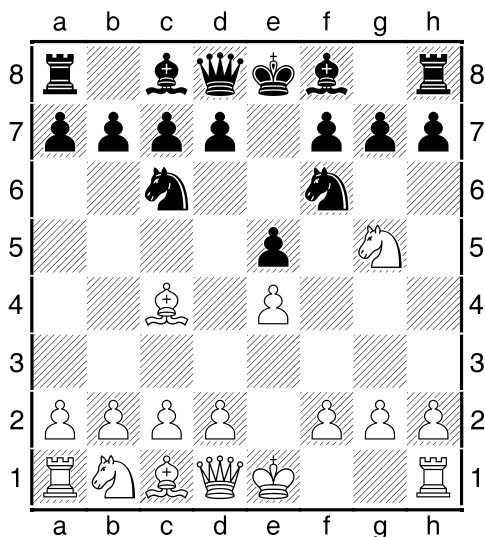
Let's suppose he **DEFENDS** the **THREATENED** Pawn with his Knight, and White now **DEVELOPS** his Bishop.



Here's the position. White now has a **DOUBLE ATTACK** on the Black Pawn on f7, which is only defended once.

In fact White is **THREATENING** to **CHECKMATE** Black by moving his Queen to capture the f7 pawn. (This **CHECKMATE** is called **SCHOLAR'S MATE**.) Black can meet this **THREAT** in several ways, for

instance by DEFENDING the Pawn by moving the Queen to e7 or f6, or by BLOCKING the Queen's path by moving the Pawn from g7 to g6.



In this (very important!) position White is again THREATENING to capture the f7 pawn. This time moving the Black Queen to e7 won't help very much. Because the Queen is more valuable than the attacking pieces White will still be able to capture on f7. The ONLY way to prevent White doing this is to BLOCK the Bishop by moving the Pawn from d7 to d5.

It follows, then, that every chess player must undertake THREE tasks every move:

- look to see if you can get CHECKMATE, capture an UNDEFENDED piece or capture a stronger piece with a weaker piece.
- look to see if your opponent is THREATENING to CHECKMATE you, to capture an UNDEFENDED piece or capture a stronger piece with a weaker piece.
- to ensure that you do not make a move which allows your opponent to CHECKMATE you, capture an UNDEFENDED piece or capture a stronger piece with a weaker piece. (This is MUCH harder, at least for young children, than the first two.)

Experienced players who have developed a good sight of the board can do this literally within a second or two – and still not make mistakes. Inexperienced players will take much longer, and will still make frequent mistakes.

Here are some ideas about how you can reinforce these concepts when you play chess with your children:

- When you create a THREAT say “Do you see what I'm threatening?”
- When your child creates a THREAT say “I see you're THREATENING my Bishop. Well done!” or words to that effect.
- When your child is about to play a move say “Make sure you move to a safe square”.
- Make an occasional mistake by (deliberately) moving a piece where it can be captured.
- Teach your children the acronym CCT (Checks, Captures, Threats) or CCTV (Checks, Captures, Threats, Violence) and get them to go through it during their games.

8. UNDERSTANDING THE OPENING

There are few things more frustrating for a chess teacher than to meet children who get the first few moves completely wrong because that's how their parents play against them at home.

Chess in its current form has been played for more than 500 years, and in that time a vast amount of information has been accumulated about the best way to play the game, much of which concerns the opening.

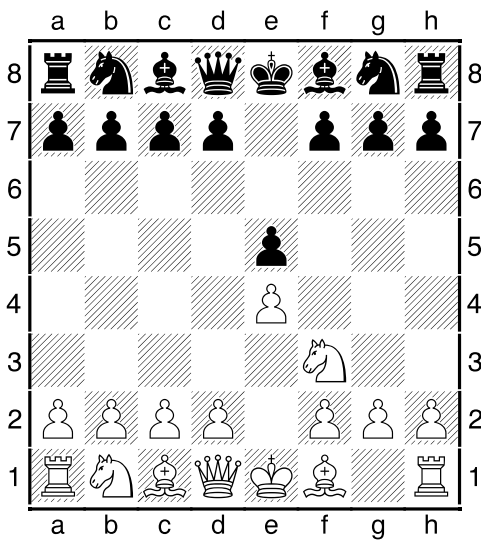
If you and your children want to get the most out of chess, and if your children want to play competitively you need to tap into that knowledge base.

First, some basic principles. As you progress you'll learn that there are many exceptions to all of these precepts, but they're a good place to start.

- You have three basic aims in the opening: to DEVELOP YOUR PIECES, to CONTROL THE CENTRE and to MAKE YOUR KING SAFE.
- The simplest way to start the game is to occupy the centre of the board with a pawn.
- Develop your Knights and Bishops as quickly as possible (usually Knights before Bishops).
- Castle early, usually on the King side, to make your King safe.
- Don't move pieces twice in the opening except to make or evade a capture.

- Don't bring the Queen out too soon, unless you can win something (or get checkmate) by doing so.
- The Rooks are the last pieces to be developed, usually only moving to occupy files vacated by pawns.
- Don't develop pieces in each other's way – instead try for a harmonious development of all your pieces.
- Don't make too many pawn moves at the start of the game. Move your two central pawns, and sometimes also your c-pawn to fight for the centre.
- Don't move your f-, g- and h-pawns in the opening – you will need those to remain unmoved to defend your King when you castle.
- Be wary about snatching pawns in the opening at the expense of development.

For some idea of how this works, return to this position.



Suppose we, wisely, decide to DEFEND our THREATENED pawn on e5. There are a number of ways of doing this. Moving the Pawn from f7 to f6 is a poor move for two reasons: it weakens the King's defences and takes the best square away from our Knight on g8. Likewise, moving the Queen from d8 to f6 brings the Queen out too soon and takes f6 away from the Knight. Moving the Queen to e7, as well as bringing the Queen out early, blocks off the Bishop on f8. While moving the Bishop from f8 to d6 blocks off the d-pawn and therefore also the Bishop on c8. This leaves two options: moving the Knight from b8 to c6 and moving the Pawn from d7 to d6. Most

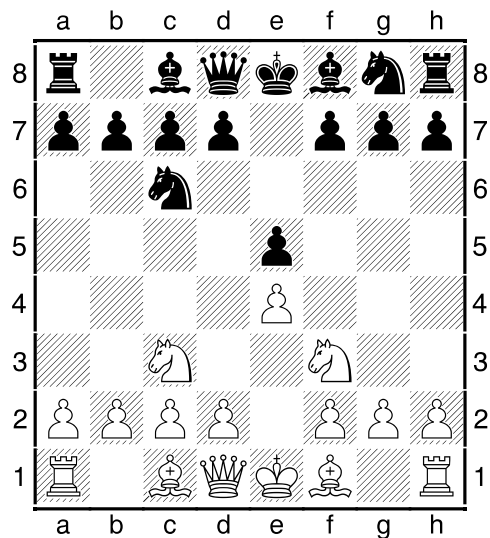
players prefer the former move because the pawn move blocks off the f8 Bishop's diagonal.

Over the centuries the best ways to start the game have acquired names. One way into chess culture is to learn the names of (and the history behind) the openings.

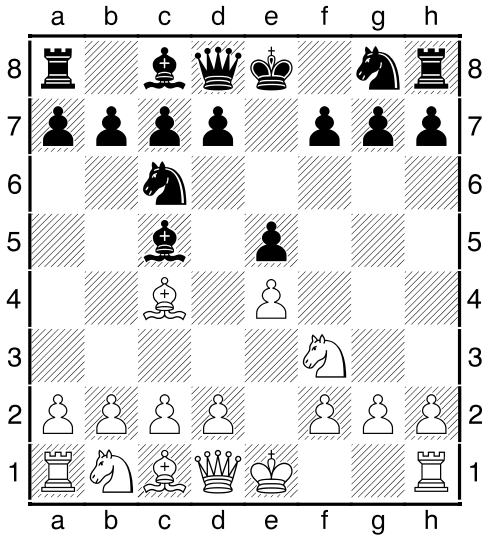
The openings most suitable for less experienced players are those in which both players start by moving their King's Pawn two squares. One reason for this is that in these openings there are fewer exceptions to the precepts listed above than in other openings. You should first of all investigate 2.Qd1-h5, because SCHOLAR'S MATE is very popular amongst young players. Once you've learned how to defend against this, move onto the openings starting with 2.Ng1-f3 (see above).

The openings we recommend you to play are:

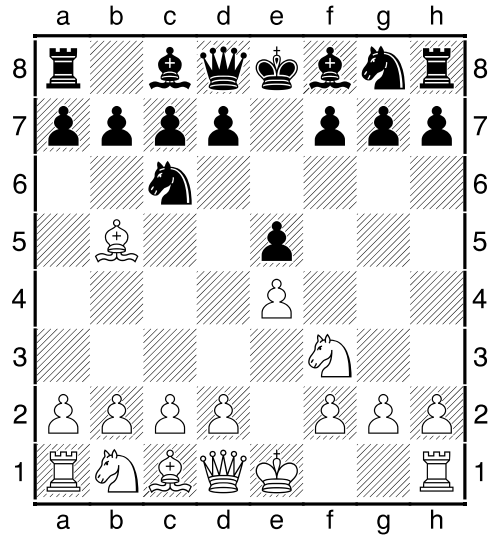
1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Nb1-c3 Ng8-f6
(The FOUR KNIGHTS OPENING)



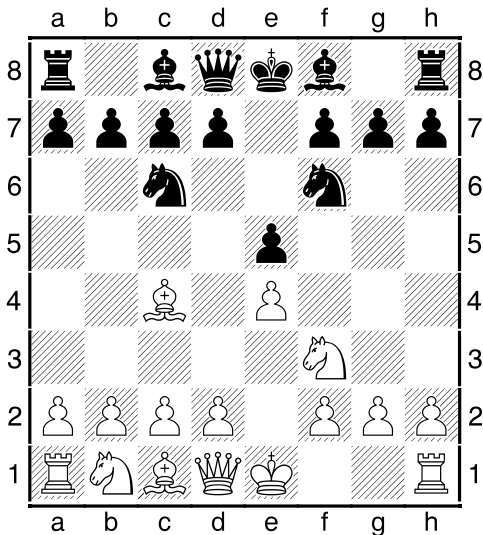
1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Bf1-c4 Bf8-c5
(The GIUOCO PIANO or ITALIAN GAME)



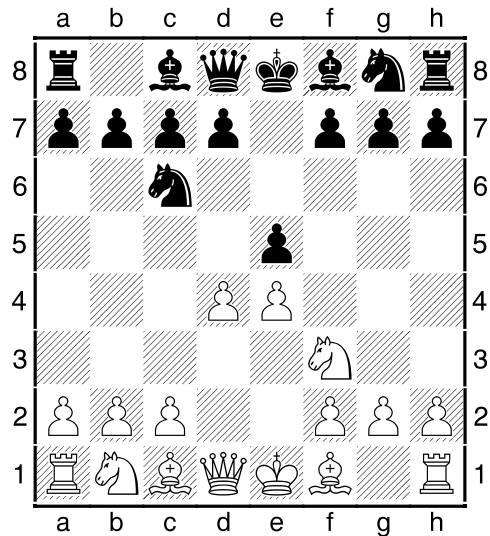
1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Bf1-b5 (The RUY LOPEZ or SPANISH OPENING)



1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Bf1-c4 Ng8-f6
(The TWO KNIGHTS DEFENCE)



1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.d2-d4 e5xd4
4.Nf3xd4 (The SCOTCH GAME)



9. PLAYING THE COMPUTER

The software we recommend for children who would like to play chess against a computer is the CHESSMASTER series. The latest version (2004) is CHESSMASTER 10th Edition but earlier versions may still be available.

In the playing area you will find a selection of personalities. Start by playing against the weakest player, Cassie. (There is also a monkey, variously called Stanley or Bobo, which plays random chess, in

the Fun/Kids area.) Choose a suitable time limit and play a game. You then have the option of asking CHESSMASTER to analyse your game. You may then print off the moves of the game (in notation) along with the annotations produced by CHESSMASTER.

When you are confident about beating Cassie move on to the next player, Pete, and repeat the same process until you find your level.

It is well worth going through the annotations together with your children to find out where you played well and where you missed opportunities to play better.

If you have a chess teacher he would probably also like to see the printouts of your games.

10. LEARNING ON THE INTERNET

Your children's chess lessons at school will be based on the chessKIDS academy website (www.chesskids.com). Using this site at home will enable you to learn with your children and reinforce what they are learning at school.

First of all, look round the site yourself. The FAQ and Parents' pages will give you a lot of background information and advice.

Next, visit the Books section, where you can download a simple explanation of the rules of chess, coaching books for children, and a story book featuring your child's name.

The main part of the site at present is a series of 64 interactive chess lessons for children, grouped into nine classes. Each lesson incorporates a quiz and, upon completing each assignment successfully your children can print out a certificate. Your children could be encouraged to take these to show their chess teacher.

We recommend that, if you are not an experienced player, you go through each lesson first on your own to familiarise yourself with the material before going through it with your children.

A future development will involve merging these lessons with quizzes in the form of video games and a story line. You can find some of this in the War Zone.

11. READING AND WRITING CHESS

To a real chess player, reading and writing chess is just as important as reading and writing anything else.

Children can learn to read chess moves very easily. We use International (Algebraic) Notation, based on the co-ordinates you see in the diagrams in this paper. Children can learn to name the squares and read chess games from a book within a few minutes.

Learning to do this opens up a whole world of enjoyment and knowledge from books, newspaper and magazine articles. And if, later on, they want to write their moves down and keep a record of their games they'll be able to do so without too much trouble.

12. YOUR NEXT MOVE

If your children enjoy playing chess and would like to take the game further they will be able to join a chess club within their school. Your chess tutor will be able to provide you with further details. Beyond that we recommend that children who would like to take chess seriously with the intention of taking part in tournaments and other competitions should join Richmond Junior Chess Club. For further information please visit our website: www.rjcc.org.uk. We can also arrange private individual and small group tuition, either on a regular or an occasional basis – visit www.chesskids.com/richmond for details of some of our private chess tutors.