TEACHING CHESS TO GROUPS

A HANDBOOK FOR YOUTH COACHES

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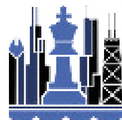

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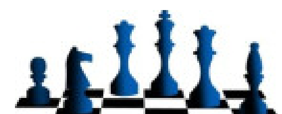

Who is this handbook for?

Many good chess players are interested in coaching but have not previously taught chess to groups. This may include parents, community residents, high school players, members of local chess clubs, and serious competitive players. If you are such a person, this handbook is for you. It does not teach chess, but instead lays out a method of teaching it. It assumes you know the rules and at least some tactics and strategy.

In **Section 1**, we lay out our general approach to teaching and recommend ways to keep your group engaged. **Section 2** is devoted to classroom management and teaching techniques. In **Section 3**, we discuss "tiered" coaching and other ways to increase your club's potential for competitive success.

We are completing a companion document which will recommend a sequence of topics and will include written and electronic teaching aids.

There are many ways to teach chess, and another approach may work better in your setting. But this handbook, prepared and reviewed by experienced coaches, is one place to start.

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Section 1: The Main Idea: Keeping Kids Engaged

Nothing is more satisfying for a teacher than creating an atmosphere in which kids are fully engaged and excited about what they are learning. How do good chess coaches do it?

Harness the excitement of chess.

As a chess coach, you have an advantage over many other teachers: you are teaching the greatest board battle game ever invented. The thrill of combat rivets kids' attention. The desire to win in chess -- whether to earn a trophy, club points, or to beat their friends or parents -- means you are likely to have a group eager to learn. Harness this excitement, and convey whenever possible the cleverness of good moves, the strength of an attack, and the beauty of the game.

Set high expectations, teach interactively, and keep your kids challenged.

Kids respond best when expectations are high. Challenge them continuously. Keep them on their toes. Get them in the habit of being prepared to explain every move they suggest. (See **Teach the Process. The Answer is Not Enough** on page 2.) Teach them notation if they don't know it so they can communicate moves efficiently ("rook to b5"). If they do well on difficult questions and you tell them so, the excitement will be contagious.

Get all your students involved in the lesson.

Tell your group that each one of them is expected to participate in lessons. Don't let a small group dominate. Encourage them to volunteer, but explain you will call on them if they don't. Knowing they may be called on may help keep them focused. Be sure each has a chance to talk at least once or twice per lesson. They will participate willingly if the exchanges are gentle and positive. (See **Keep Things Positive** on page 2.)

Don't skimp on lessons.

Nothing will ensure your club's success and popularity as much as the strength of your teaching program. Much of this handbook is devoted to building quality, but don't ignore quantity. Lessons should ideally be at least 30 minutes in length, and we prefer 45. Some may tell you their kids won't last that long, but don't believe it. If you're good, and convey the excitement of the game, you'll be able to keep their attention -- even the kids in kindergarten (See **Special Considerations for K-1's** in **Section 2** on page 5).

Aim part of each lesson to each skill level within your group.

Every teaching group has kids at different skill levels. Try to ensure that a part of every lesson is aimed at everyone in the group. For example, although many coaches like to "aim above the middle," be sure to include some easier material for your less advanced kids, and some challenging material for those who are more advanced. Learning is always a percentage proposition, but every kid should "connect" with at least a part of every lesson.

Get them out of their seats.

When they volunteer or you call on them, encourage them to come to the board. Using the board usually makes it easier for them to explain their answer. Kids who move around occasionally are also less likely to get antsy. This can work even if you think you've lost someone's attention.

Combine didactic lessons and game play against a computer.

There will be times when you'll want to simply explain chess rules and skills to your students. Examples of such focused lessons are how the pieces move, their point values, a new tactic, or a mating pattern. Didactic lessons are efficient and often a good way to start.

New players also need to learn the flow of the game and how to integrate the ideas they have been taught such as opening principles, counting attackers and defenders, and recognizing board patterns vulnerable to tactics. We recommend having your group play together against a computerized opponent, using a smart board or projector. We suggest some techniques in Section 2.

Often, in a particular lesson, you'll want to use one method or the other. If their attention is good, stay with the method you started with. If they're beginning to drift, mix it up.

Ask open-ended questions and encourage free-association.

If you're having your students analyze board positions which contain "best moves" or sequences of moves, ask them first to describe what they see on the board, especially strengths and weaknesses for both sides, before asking for "the answer." Tell them you're not looking for a single answer, and that there may be many good answers. Teach them to keep their minds open and flexible without feeling pressed to come up with "the" solution; this is easier for them and will invite them into the process. Encourage free association, and reward them for finding clues which, when pieced together, will lead to the answer you're looking for.

Teach the process. "The answer" is not enough.

Your better students may quickly see the best move, or a good move. If they simply suggest the move, without explanation, many in your group may not understand why the move makes sense. More important, they may not know **how** the move was discovered. This is a difficult but crucial part of teaching -- articulating or recreating the thinking process leading to discovery of the move. Sometimes there will be particular aspects of the board position, such as a threat, a vulnerability or an attacking opportunity, that led to the move being suggested. Try to get your students to articulate the creative process leading to the suggestion. This is what critical thinking is all about.

Keep things positive.

Do all you can to keep your sessions upbeat. When they are doing well, give your students verbal "attaboys," club points, or other positive feedback. Tell them in front of the group that you are pleased by their progress. If they are struggling, ask increasingly simple questions until they can give a right answer. (See Rescue them when they are stuck in Section 2 on page 8.) Each exchange with a student should be "ego positive."

There will inevitably be times when your group is not focused and kids are not volunteering answers. (See **Having trouble keeping them focused?** in **Section 2** on page 6.) But keep in mind that nothing distracts a group of students faster than criticism.

Teach the psychology.

Talk with your kids about the inevitable psychological ups and downs of a typical game. Remind them not to be overconfident when they have captured a major piece, or to be overly discouraged when they lose one. The focus should always be on slowing down and being patient. All of us reach a point when we feel pressure to make a move, but learning to recognize this feeling can sometimes allow us to extend our period of concentration. Even 15 or 30 more seconds can make a big difference. Try to get them to stretch their patience.

Encourage them to try to ignore potential distractions. Bobby Fischer famously insisted that his playing conditions be as close to perfect as possible, including the temperature of the room, the lighting, the reflectiveness of the pieces, and the noise. He did so to minimize his distractions. Asked to describe how he differed from other top players, he said it was not that he was more intelligent, or had studied chess more diligently, or had a better memory. The difference, he said, was that he spent as much as 90% of his mental energy concentrating on potential moves and their consequences. He thought other players spent as little as 30% of their time doing so. Make this real for your kids, encouraging them to ignore their stream of consciousness (the "ticker tape"). Talk about potential distractions they can relate to. ("I wonder what's for dinner?" "Who's that cute boy/girl across the room?" "I really want to win that trophy.")

Talk to them about recovering from losses. Tell them about experiences you have had, including blunders. Share your own games and your thought processes at key moments. Make them comfortable thinking and talking about the stresses they'll feel which all chess players experience.

Teach with a computer.

Large, bright images will keep the kids' attention longer than a conventional demonstration board. If you have access to an interactive white board such as a Promethian or Smart board, use a utility that allows you to both operate your chess software and mark up the board. Using a computer not only saves time (you don't have to reset positions manually) but also keeps kids' attention. Considerable mischief can take place when you turn your back on the group and there is dead time while you are setting up a new position on a demo board. It can take time and effort to get kids refocused.

Get kids to teach each other.

Some kids, perhaps a quarter or more, enjoy teaching, especially teaching younger kids. This is a frequently ignored resource, but should be actively developed. Possibilities range from informal, short-term help to organized longer-term efforts.

Perhaps you have a new member of your club who needs to learn how the pieces move, or their point values. Ask for volunteers, or ask specific kids to help out. If you have a "reward point" system,

give them points for teaching. Perhaps you realize that a more advanced player does not understand a tactic. Do the same, picking an advanced player you are confident has the requisite knowledge. Some of your players may enjoy teaching so much that they will take on more regular assignments. Students in middle and high school can be excellent teachers of your youngest players (See Special Considerations for K-1's on page 5). Give them a written curriculum to follow.

Strong and mature high school players can also be excellent group coaches, and some can teach groups as large as 15. Like all coaches, they'll need to be trained and observed. Some will need or benefit from the presence of a parent or other adult.

Section 2: Classroom Management & Teaching Techniques

Control your group.

Keep them focused on the questions you are raising. At the same time, make your group as comfortable as possible and encourage them. Use humor and praise, and be fair in giving each of them opportunities to contribute to the discussion by explaining what they see.

Make clear how you expect them to behave, and be specific (e.g., no running, no playing catch, no giving advice to others during their games). Some coaches post rules of behavior at their clubs or include them in a club handbook.

Keep your group compact.

Arrange the chairs in your teaching room into fairly tight rows relatively close to the board or screen. Kids farthest back often pay less attention and are the most disruptive. Small kids should be in first row. Leave aisles in the rows so kids can easily get to the board.

Frame your lessons.

When you start a lesson, remind your kids where you are in your overall teaching plan. For example, if you've done the rules and opening principles and are moving on to ideas for the middle game, tell them. Do the same as you teach tactics: remind them you've already done forks and skewers and are moving on to pins. This helps kids understand how the various parts of the game fit together. One coach displays a simplified listing of the major objectives of the opening, middle game and end game and points to the location of that day's lesson on the list.

Move around.

Most of us get bored focusing on a speaker who remains in one location. Therefore, when your space and lesson plan permit, move around the room. Get in behind your students sometimes as you look at board positions together. The ones in the back are more likely to pay attention.

Special Considerations for K-1's.

Students in kindergarten and first grade can be excellent chess players, and some of them can learn as quickly as older kids. Some of them, however, may have trouble visualizing the game on a computer screen or demo board, or may be intimidated by being in a group of mostly older kids. We therefore recommend that K-1's be taught in one or more separate small groups of six or fewer, using an actual chess board. We often leave these groups in our main playing room, where they can be overseen by an adult. Parents, high school or middle school students can be excellent teachers. Keep an eye peeled for kids who are mature and would enjoy the experience. Parents of these young coaches often comment on how rare and valuable it is for their kids to be given real responsibility and to work in an environment where expectations are high that they will be steady and reliable.

If your club is tiered, some K-1's may be able to quickly move up into your larger groups. Others need to learn more slowly or in smaller doses. When teaching a small group, we suggest the coach sit on one side of a table, with one student on each side, and three others directly across. Let the kids handle the pieces and have each of them demonstrate they have learned each segment of what they have been taught.

Having trouble keeping them focused?

You will learn to quickly recognize when you've lost the attention of some or all of your students. Perhaps they (or you) are having an off day, or they are finding a new concept particularly difficult, or you are not being as clear as you usually are.

If you're doing a puzzle, it may help to make the problem easier by giving your group additional clues to a move "hidden in plain sight." For example, ask questions such as "Does White's Knight have a problem defending the Queen?" or "Is there anything about Black's position in this corner which may cause Black to lose a piece?" Many coaches feed their students such clues one at a time, and challenge them at each stage, to build suspense.

If you've lost your group but have enough time left, change what you're doing. Switch to a new topic, or change teaching method (e.g. from didactic to "play" mode). Offering the kids bonus points for good answers will sometimes wake them up. Sometimes you can get their attention back by telling them a good chess story you've been saving for them. In any event, try not to show your frustration.

A useful and amusing book on classroom management is "Tools for Teaching" by Fred Jones; much of the content is also online (http://bit.ly/1Gymlar). Much of it is written from the point of view of a student who doesn't want to pay attention but doesn't want to get caught. Jones makes useful suggestions about using your voice and making eye contact, including using what he terms the "Queen Victoria" look (making yourself look like you don't want to be meddled with).

Set up a system of bonus points.

Kids love earning points, which also frequently motivates them to do things they otherwise might not do. You'll want a reward system such as medals, certificates, or objects they can display such as school color key chains. Some clubs use "thinking tags" (http://bit.ly/1e2Y8SR). Some award points for teaching other kids, doing notation, and helping clean up at the end of club sessions. If your lessons are dragging, offering points to students who perform well often wakes them up.

Playing against a computer...

...may be the best way to gauge the overall progress of a teaching group and to see if they are able to integrate the lessons you've taught. Can they make sound opening moves, spot tactical opportunities, and make the common mates?

A few suggestions: If they can choose the strength of their opponent, guide them but let them decide. Often they'll be willing to play an opponent they think is better than they are. Then decide what color they will be playing. If they are playing white, ask someone to suggest a move. Let others make another suggestion or two and then ask the group what move they think is best. Make sure they can

articulate a reason for each suggestion. Then let them decide, by vote if there doesn't seem to be a consensus. Don't aim for perfection, as it will take too long. See what move the computer makes and repeat the process. Keep all of them thinking about good moves and knowing they might be called on if they don't volunteer.

Usually, you won't be able to finish a game when playing against a computer. Use software that allows you to save the game position so you can return to it in a subsequent lesson. Lots of software has this feature, including **Chessmaster** and **Fritz.**

Avoid team games.

Some coaches set up team games, with half the class playing against the other half, and each team huddling before their moves. The problem with this approach is that teams are usually dominated by one or more top players, leaving the others disconnected, discouraged or bored. Team games also make it harder for you as the coach to tease out the thought process behind each move, since the two teams are each trying to be secretive. We don't recommend them.

Game reviews.

Previously played games provide extraordinarily good teaching content. This includes not only famous games in chess history played by the game's great players but may include games played by the coach or others. Some coaches, especially those teaching more advanced players, teach primarily by doing game reviews. We heartily endorse this practice. At the same time, we recommend sparing use of this technique with inexperienced players. The subtlety of moves by the masters will likely be lost on them until they are thoroughly familiar with tactics and strategy.

A related point: Most players agree that the best single way to learn is to have someone more experienced review their own games, focusing especially on weak moves. This is a terrific way to teach, especially with small groups or individual players. It is frequently a mainstay of private lessons.

Homework and handouts.

Some coaches give kids homework, usually in written handouts, and occasionally online. While there is much to be said for this, and the most eager students may participate and benefit, our experience is that most kids do not have the time or interest to do homework, so the results are often disappointing. We leave it to you to decide whether it's worth the effort.

At the same time, kids and parents often like chess handouts to peruse at their leisure. This includes articles about chess and lists of strategy tips. For one example, see http://bit.ly/1APULbF. Many kids also enjoy interactive tactics trainers like those at chess.com, chesskid.com, and chesstempo.com.

Say, see, and do.

When you can, follow the rule "Say, See, and Do." First explain the point. For example, if the lesson topic is how to mate with a king and queen, explain the idea of using the queen to put the king in a box and making it smaller and smaller, advancing your king as necessary, until you can mate. Use the

board as an aid while you do so. Then demonstrate the technique with an example or two. Then bring one or more kids to the board and have them do it themselves. Then, if time permits, have them practice the technique over the board with a partner. The sooner they practice what you've tried to teach, the more likely the lesson will sink in.

The 4 questions.

As kids learn, make sure they follow the fundamentals. We encourage our kids to memorize four questions to be asked before every move:

a) Am I in trouble? (Do I have a piece that can be captured, or is there a mate threat?)
b) Is my opponent in trouble? (ask the same questions as above)
c) Why did my opponent move there?
d) Am I sure I'm moving to a better square, and one which is safe? (This is more complicated, as "better" can mean a lot of things, but it reinforces the need to be able to explain every move.)

At a certain point, these questions become automatic, but encouraging kids to ask them consciously prevents many a careless blunder.

Repetition.

Don't hesitate to review or repeat lessons or parts of lessons, especially if some time has passed since the last time the material was taught. Many of us need to hear something more than once for it to register. And kids might have missed the lesson the first time it was taught.

Rescue them when they are stuck.

We talked above about keeping things positive. Let your students know that if they are called upon and can't think of something useful to say, they can "pass." If they participate and get something wrong, gently correct them. Whether they have volunteered or been called upon, they may also stumble or freeze. Do everything you can to make sure the exchange ends on a positive note. If they are stuck on an answer, ask easier and easier questions until the student finds one he or she can answer. If the question involves seeing something in a board position, provide clues to help them focus, like drawing their attention to a key part of the board and asking "what's going on here?" or even focusing them on a particular piece. Be sure, though, that by the time they sit down, they have reason to think they have done at least part of the exercise well. Encourage them and protect their egos. Consider giving them bonus points for the part they got right, or even for trying hard.

Disruptive behavior.

Participants in your club should be required to attend lessons. You will therefore want to have a system in place for kids who are disruptive. This may occur because a child has been placed in an incorrect ability section (recall that groups should be based on ability, not age). Assuming the child is properly placed, you should consider an escalating series of sanctions. Most club directors start with a warning to the child. If your club has a point system which includes behavior, consider taking points off. Consider moving the student to a seat away from the main group. These "time outs" can be of whatever duration seems necessary.

Note that we do not recommend that you ask disruptive kids to leave the teaching room. This can reward bad behavior.

If problems persist, tell the child you will talk to his parents, and do so. In extreme cases, call the parents and ask them to pick up their child. The vast majority of parents will understand and support you.

If the situation continues or deteriorates, you will need to consider other options. One is to require that a parent or caregiver be with the child when he or she is at your club. Another is to suspend the child temporarily (often a week or two is sufficient) or drop them permanently from the club. Even a small number of disruptive students can be a drain on the group and can make learning impossible for the others. Do everyone a favor by demonstrating that negative actions have consequences.

Section 3: Tiered Coaching & Competitive Success

"Tier" your club if you can, and use multiple rooms.

Ideally, especially after the first year, your club will be divided into lesson groups based on ability, with separate coaches teaching different groups. Many clubs convene in a large space, usually a cafeteria, multi-purpose room, or library. Once lessons start, however, kids go off into separate, quiet rooms, where it will be easier to focus without distractions. Most principals will help you find appropriate space, including classrooms. It may be helpful to speak to chess-friendly teachers in advance and tell your principal which are willing to have their rooms used.

Students in kindergarten and first grade may do better if kept together in small groups in your main room. (See **Special Considerations for K-1's** in **Section 2** on page 5.)

Add coaches.

To "tier" your club, you will need to add coaches. The Chicago Chess Foundation should be able to help. Potential coaches may be closer than you think – parents, teachers, community residents, and high school and college students. They will need to pass a background check, and will need guidance and training, which CCF plans to provide. Their skill level will likely determine which lesson group they will teach. Some may volunteer; others will need to be paid, but sometimes not very much. High school students may be willing to coach in exchange for community service credit. CCF's Fellows Program will identify and train qualified student candidates. As we've mentioned, middle school students can be effective teaching K-1's. You may need to place a parent or other adult with them to assist in discipline.

Train your coaches.

You may be fortunate and find coaching candidates with experience in classroom teaching and technology. More likely, your coaches will need training. CCF should be able to help. The approach we favor is outlined below.

Start with an orientation session. Explain the basics such as when your club meets, when they will need to get there, your goals for your club, logistics (security clearance, payroll, etc.), available technology, and intended curriculum. Give them any documents or handbooks you'd like them to use or be aware of, including this handbook.

Then have them watch other coaches teach. If you have coaches of very differing styles, have them watch more than one as they decide for themselves what appears to work best. Encourage them to develop their own styles.

When they are ready, and if you have the luxury, have them teach segments of a day's lesson, alternating with you or another coach. Encourage them and help them build confidence as teachers. Even top players can be nervous and unsure of themselves in front of a group until they gain experience. Stress the importance of simplicity, clarity and eye contact. Tell them to call the kids by their names.

Whenever possible, observe your new coach before you give him or her a class of their own, and get them used to the idea of being watched. If you don't have the time, have another coach or parent observe them and talk to you afterwards. If your new coach needs improvement, be blunt with them afterwards and as precise in your critique as you can. Demonstrate what you think may be more effective techniques. Combine any criticism with praise whenever you can.

Encourage them to talk about the wider chess world. If they are comfortable doing so, encourage them to tell their kids stories about great players, moments in chess history, or their own chess ups and downs. Have them bring the chess world alive.

Talk about tournaments.

Most kids are eager to compete, and it therefore makes sense for coaches to talk up tournament play. Kids almost invariably enjoy playing in tournaments and school-versus-school matches. Like it or not, there are few incentives as powerful to kids as winning trophies and medals. Perhaps more important, competition spurs kids to improve their game by continuing to learn. If you have played competitively, weave anecdotes and examples from your own experience into your lessons and convey the excitement of playing under pressure against opponents they probably won't know.

When there are upcoming tournaments, be sure to tell your clubs, and have flyers available. Many coaches notify parents by email as well. For details on how tournaments are organized and run, and a description of the major events in Illinois, see the discussion on the ICA webpage.

http://bit.ly/1APZbiO

Use a rating system.

Some clubs use a computerized rating and ranking system which allows players to track their progress as they move up and down on their club "ladder." One such system, which we recommend, is "Chess Club Manager" from the makers of Think Like a King software. It utilizes an algorithm to calculate the value of wins and losses which is similar to the Elo method used by the United States Chess Federation.

True, putting ratings on display may be dispiriting to some kids at the bottom of your ladder. But we have found those situations to be surprisingly rare. On balance, we think the advantage of using such a system -- supporting and nurturing the competitive instincts of your stronger players -- outweighs any disadvantages. It's your call.

Section 4: Other Resources

A vast amount has been written about chess and is available in both hard copy and online. Whether you are starting a club or trying to improve one, we especially recommend the comprehensive package of online youth resources appearing on the website of the Illinois Chess Association.

http://bit.ly/1APZbiO

The resources include the research on the benefits of chess; links to videos of kids, teachers, and experts talking about those benefits; an overview of chess in Chicago and the state of Illinois, a section on competition including a description of major tournaments and a detailed guide to how tournaments are run, and a discussion of sportsmanship and etiquette.

But the centerpiece of the online resources is a section called "Starting a Chess Program" which addresses every step in the process including initial planning, equipment, instruction and curricula (including computer-aided instruction), budgeting, volunteer recruitment, publicity, and club management. The Resources section also includes a guide to choosing a private service provider.

http://bit.ly/fLs6uL

Chicago Chess Foundation
chicagolandchess.org

Michael Bologna, President
mbologna@bna.com

Illinois Chess Association
il-chess.org

Carl Dolson, President
carl_dolson@yahoo.com

Jerry Neugarten, primary author, CCF and ICA Boards jerryn@statetel.com