

# Chess Empowers YoungMinds

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By Bob Patterson-Sumwalt

**T**here are many myths and stories about the origins of chess. According to David Shenk, author of *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess*, one of the oldest myths tells of two successive Indian Kings, Hashran and Balhait. King Hashran asked his sage to invent a game symbolizing man's dependence on destiny and fate; the sage invented "nard," the dice-based predecessor to backgammon. King Balhait, however, commissioned a game that would embrace his belief in free will and intelligence. That game became chess, which the king reportedly preferred to nard because he believed "skill always succeeds against ignorance."



Writes Shenk, "The game, in all reality, was not invented all at once, in a fit of inspiration by a single king, general, philosopher, or court wizard. Rather, it was almost certainly (like the Bible and the Internet) the result of years of tinkering by a large, decentralized group, a slow, collective intelligence. After what might have been centuries of tinkering, chatrang, the first true version of what we now call chess, finally emerged in Persia sometime during the fifth or sixth century."

Over time, chess became a unifying force, transcending cultural, language and physical barriers. Shenk notes that an Italian monk named Jacobus de Cessolis wrote a book about chess around 1300 that was translated into seven languages. Shenk describes the work as "potent," and "having an impact on all of Europe as virtually no other piece of writing in the Middle Ages did." According to chess historian Harold Murray, the book's popularity "must have rivaled that of the Bible itself."

Ben Franklin, who loved chess, noted in 1786 that chess, "has, for numberless ages, been the amusement of all the civilized nations of Asia, the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. Europe has had it above a thousand years, the Spaniards have spread it over their part of America, and it begins lately to make its appearance in these States."

Explains Shenk, “The game would eventually pass into every city in the world and along more than 1500 years of continuous history – a common thread of Pawn chains, Knight forks, and humiliating checkmates that would run through the lives of Karl Marx, Pope Leo XIII, Arnold Schwarzenegger, King Edward I, George Bernard Shaw, Abraham Lincoln, Ivan the Terrible, Voltaire, King Montezuma, Rabbi Ibn Ezra, William the Conqueror, Jorge Luis Borges, Willie Nelson, Napoleon, Samuel Becket, Woody Allen, and Norman Schwarzkopf.”



### **Like a Runner’s High**

So what is it about chess that has been so compelling to so many for so long? Why has this one game captured the hearts and souls of millions of people over so many generations?

Alexey Root, senior lecturer in General Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, and a past U.S. Women's Chess Champion, says its partly the “flow” and “runner’s high” that chess players experience.

Humanistic psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines “flow” experiences as those that bring individuals so much enjoyment they are able to lose themselves, for a while, in what they are doing. Such moments, he contends, enable people to be satisfied with and have a sense of exercising control over their lives.



Root, author of *Children and Chess, A Guide for Educators*, notes that Csikszentmihalyi cites chess as an activity that promotes “flow” in that it involves “deep concentration on the activity at hand.” Because of that, chess can help bring order to children’s lives, helping them avoid chaos, says Root.

She goes on to point out that children quietly sitting at a chessboard also experience a “runner’s high,” the result of physiological changes such as increases in heart rate and blood pressure.

In scholastic tournaments across the United States and around the world that’s exactly what’s experienced by groups of 100 to 200 children as they intently focus on the boards in front of them in virtual silence



The only sounds: the quiet ticking of chess clocks, muffled scribbling as players record their moves, and the occasionally voiced “check.” This despite the fact that many of these same children, only minutes before, had been energetically playing dodge ball, tag, or basketball.

## **Myriad Benefits**

The effects of such experiences can be amazing. At a recent Chess in Education conference, I listened to a presentation by Joseph Eberhard, co-chair of the U. S. Chess Federation’s Chess in Education Committee. Eberhard told of his experience growing up in a poor household in western Iowa with an alcoholic father. It was only after he was introduced to chess in his pre-teen years, said Eberhard, that he began to think differently, analyze problems more effectively, and start to feel better about himself. He went on to do his doctoral studies on the effect of teaching chess to children, which he has been doing for the last 10 years in South Texas.

As Eberhard himself discovered, children who learn chess experience incredible intellectual growth. Why? In large part, because chess requires students to master and use high-level thinking skills, a concept immortalized in Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. When they learn chess, students quickly move beyond merely acquiring and understanding facts – skills that rank low on Bloom's Taxonomy – to analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information – the most complex.

Many studies have shown the benefits of chess in education. Peter Dauvergne, a Canadian chess master and former senior lecturer in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney, Australia, surveyed those studies and in 2000 published the following list of what chess does for children:

- ❖ Raises intelligence quotient (IQ) scores
- ❖ Strengthens problem-solving skills, teaching children how to make difficult and abstract decisions independently
- ❖ Enhances reading, memory, language, and mathematical abilities
- ❖ Fosters critical, creative, and original thinking
- ❖ Provides practice at making accurate and fast decisions under time pressure, a skill that can help improve test scores
- ❖ Teaches how to think logically and efficiently, learning to select the 'best' choice from a large number of options
- ❖ Challenges gifted children, including those who are underachieving, to learn how to study and strive for excellence
- ❖ Demonstrates the importance of flexible planning, concentration, and the consequences of decisions
- ❖ Reaches boys and girls regardless of their natural abilities or socio-economic backgrounds

Given these educational benefits, Dauvergne concludes that, "The case, then, is exceptionally strong for using chess to develop our children's minds and help them cope with the growing complexities and demands of a globalizing world."



## **A Growing Movement**

It's not surprising, then, that chess as an educational tool is growing rapidly across the United States. More than 15,000 students in second and third grade in 14 states, for example, are now learning chess through First Move, a curriculum developed by America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization founded in Kirkland, Wash., in 2000 to promote chess in American schools and culture. The program was designed specifically so that teachers who don't play chess can successfully teach the game, in 30 one-hour lessons, to their students.



For years, my oldest son played soccer in elementary school in a suburb of Denver. At that time there were 50,000 kids playing soccer in a metropolitan area of two million people. It is conceivable to me that the same phenomenon can, and is beginning to occur, when it comes to chess.

This is what the Wisconsin Scholastic Chess Federation is all about. Making that happen. And in the process, growing young minds for the future.

### ***Bob Patterson-Sumwalt***

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