

Parent's Corner

Chess is a game that has been around for about 1,500 years and has been a national pastime for many Eastern European countries for centuries. The Russians have dominated modern chess for three quarters of the past century, during which time 12 different Russians have held the world title (with a three year hiatus for a guy named Bobby Fischer.) The game has taken a bit longer to catch on at St. Charles, but "catch on" it has. 70 students participated in some Chess Club activity during the 2003-04 school year and the St. Charles Grades 1-3 team took 8th place in the State Elementary Championships. Our success is due in part to our "system" (more on that later), but it all starts with parental support.

Why is chess good for my child?

There are many studies linking chess playing with the ability to develop complex but efficient structures for memory storage and management. The ability to make reasoned judgments, think critically and solve problems is also linked to students of chess. One researcher proved a significant increase in reading ability by children after they learned how to play chess. There is also evidence that links ability in mathematics to chess proficiency, but this is less clear. Surprisingly, more conclusive studies have shown a correlation between chess playing and improved social skills. Researchers believe that this is partly the result of the lack of socio-economic boundaries in the chess world. Chess becomes an equalizer between kids of differing socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

What other "mental exercise" could you offer your child that would be so openly accepted? Our experience at St. Charles has been that most kids can't wait for Chess Club every Wednesday morning. Once they get in our "system", they work hard to put forth their best effort and most fully enjoy the process. The goal is to keep the system as pain-free and enjoyable as possible so they'll stick it out. Many kids who don't "get" chess at first reach their "A-Ha!" moment sometimes months, maybe years later. When they do, they will have gained a valuable life skill that will stay with them for life. A skill that they can enjoy with their parents, their children, and their grandchildren.

We're really busy and can't take on one more thing.

We've all been there and done that. That's why Chess Club is open on a drop-in basis. There is no fee to pay and no attendance requirement (except when your child has a continued game. Even then, they can just resign that game if they like.) Your child can play as little or as much as they like. Be warned, though, that we do everything we can to make them want to come back.

Like soccer, baseball, basketball, music, or any number of other activities vying for your child's time and attention, there is the usual promise of enjoyment and camaraderie and the implicit goal of finding out if that sport or activity will be your child's "thing". If it does, Chess Club can become time consuming and a little costly. For our top players in each age category, participation in occasional Saturday tournaments is encouraged, with our ultimate goal being to qualify as many players as possible for the State Championships held in April (this year in Lynden, Washington). For those invited to play with the team in weekend tournaments, attendance is completely optional, but we do ask you to RSVP when invited as quickly as possible so that alternates can be invited. Every player is responsible for their own entry fees, transportation, and food for these events (we also ask that you purchase a team shirt), but as with everything else at St. Charles, money should never be the reason for non-participation. Enough club funds will be available to ensure that everyone invited to play with the team is financially able, particularly when it comes to the State Tournament.

What are the downsides?

Unlike other team activities, chess is very much focused on individual accomplishments and skills. There is no one to "pass the ball to" when confronted with challenging situations and no one else to blame when things don't go well. Because of this, chess play can involve much more stress than participation in other activities. Since our players work so hard to have success in their games, the "high" from winning is great but the "low" from losing can be very upsetting. Preparing our players for each of these eventualities is a very important aspect of our "system". Accepting defeat and learning from it is a difficult lesson for our young players and we try to be very sensitive to that while encouraging them to keep trying.

For our kids who tend to win more often, it is equally important that we always keep them humble, not overly competitive, and courteous. Chess etiquette is taught along with the rules, and it is constantly reinforced. Of all the things we teach them during their experience with the Chess Club, good sportsmanship is at the head of the list.

So, what is this "system"?

Most chess tournaments employ a system known as "Swiss Pairing". This means that as the rounds progress, those with the same score play each other. Generally, this means that as players win, their opponents get tougher and as they lose, their opponents get easier, until there is parity in the relative strengths of opponents in each game.

We use this same concept by rating all Chess Club games and pairing the kids against others with about this same "strength" rating. Because so many kids come out every week to play, we are usually able to pair your child against

someone with a rating of plus or minus 25 points. In these cases, the winner of the game receives 21 rating points and the loser's rating decreases by 21 points. If they draw, no points will be won or lost. If we have to pair opponents who are not so equally rated, the lower rated player will be risking fewer rating points and the higher ranked opponent will be risking more.

Using this system of pairing, most players end up winning and losing about equally. The exceptions include the player at the very top of the ratings list, the new players during their first five games, and the players whose skills are improving at a different rate than the group as a whole. This system tends to keep the top players relatively humble and gives the lower rated players plenty of opportunities to win games. Of course, an unavoidable downside of the ratings system is that the kids become too focused on their ratings, possibly causing some bad feelings. However, this is very much like receiving a grade in class – some kids are just going to earn higher grades and some lower. We give everyone the tools to improve their chess “grade” and it is up to them whether or not to do the extra work.

As a coach, the ratings system works extremely well when it comes time to pick players to represent St. Charles in team events. The rules to make the team can be made extremely clear to everyone and there should be no possibility of accusing the coach of playing “favorites”. The Club ratings (with some consideration given to State ratings) determine who is invited – pure and simple. The only issue to decide before each tournament is how many players we want to take. Ideally, we will only take players who ultimately score at least 2.0 points in a 5 round tournament. This is done strictly to limit the frustration level for those who aren't quite ready for that tournament. It can be a long Saturday for the player who doesn't at least pull off one win and a couple of draws or two wins during the day.

What do you expect of parents?

Parents, as a group, make or break our whole program. However, as with anything else, some parents are obviously going to be able to contribute more significantly than others. For our regular Club meetings and lessons, your minimum involvement is to get your child there on time. We also encourage parents to learn the game themselves because family play is a great benefit of our program. We are always interested in bringing in the better chess-playing parents to help with oversight of games because so many rules questions come up every week. Unfortunately, some of our better chess-playing parents don't have as much flexibility in their schedules to help out on Wednesday mornings, but we'd still like to know who you are for other events and to help with teaching opportunities.

If you are a parent who doesn't play but has time and would like to help, we can usually find a way for you to contribute. For parents of “team” players, we don't

require that you attend weekend events, but a high percentage of our parents have traditionally attended all or part of the events. There are always enough parents in attendance at these events to maintain proper supervision of all the children, but there's really no substitute for having Mom and/or Dad somewhere in the waiting area after either winning or losing a tough game, especially at one's first tournament.

Small cash donations are sometimes requested of all parents to help with supply purchases, but we really are pretty well stocked for a large group of kids. It is very important that we keep a strict "no-fee" policy while kids try us out, but it is also important that we have enough money to help those who can't afford to attend all of our events. In particular, because this year's State Tournament is going to require overnight travel for our team, we will probably do some fund raising to help defray costs for those who qualify. All parents can help us out with that by either donating time or by contributing.