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CHESS: IT APPEALS TO CHILDREN OF ALL AGES AND BACKGROUNDS, AND IT'S A POWERFUL TOOL FOR STRENGTHENING THE MIND, AS DAVID CORDOVER EXPLAINS.

CHESS: IT'S ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING activities in Australian schools. Consider the figures. In 2002, the Chess Kids National Interscholar Chess Championships involved 821 children. By 2007, there were more than 9,000 students taking part. That's an increase of more than 900 per cent in five years. Why? There are two reasons. First, chess appeals to children of all ages and backgrounds. Even those as young as four and five years are able to grasp the basic rules of the game and enjoy play. Second, it offers educational benefits that have been proven in research and are now being experienced by educators firsthand as schools across the country grow their own successful chess programs.

If you think chess is just another school sport, like teeball, netball or football, think again. Yes, it does provide similar benefits, such as boosting self confidence, but it's all-inclusive, non-gender specific and, most importantly, a powerful tool for strengthening the mind.

The game has been played and enjoyed by people around the world for over 2,000 years and its brain-building capabilities have been professed by psychologists and philosophers for almost as many years. Various research projects and studies have looked into the benefits of chess, and more recently the chess-education relationship.

Consider the Chess and Aptitude study conducted by Dr Albert Frank at the Lisanga School in Kisnagani, Zaire, for example. Frank divided the children into two groups, a control group and an experimental group which undertook a compulsory chess course for two hours each week with optional play after school and during holidays. After only one year, the students participating in the chess course showed a marked development of their verbal and numerical aptitudes over and above those in the control group.

More recently and locally, in Castlemaine, Victoria, a program called Chess-Squared is introducing the game to Year 6 Maths students. The program, a partnership between Castlemaine Chess Club, La Trobe University and 12 schools in the area, has been running for two years and aims to measure the benefits of chess in terms of numeracy. Initial results have surprised teachers. For instance, those children excelling at chess are not necessarily the ones usually performing at the top of the Maths class. By creating success for low-achieving children, chess is having a profound effect on their attitudes to school, and increasing their confidence as well as improving their strategies when it comes to tackling tricky Maths problems.

In the contemporary classroom and its 'thinking curriculum,' content is less impor-

tance than strategy, skill and method – and let's face it, this makes sense considering today's students will probably be required as adults to perform tasks and fulfil job descriptions that don't yet exist.

An educator's role is to prepare students with skills for life, not facts that are to be regurgitated and will become obsolete after school. The goal is for students to become independent workers and thinkers with the ability to reason, problem solve and plan.

Many life skills can be learned through the seemingly simple game of chess. It stimulates problem solving, abstract analysis, spatial aptitude, originality, concentration, memory and organisational skills, just to name a few. But the most important overarching skill that a student can learn through the game is responsibility.

As Benjamin Franklin put it way back in 1786 in *The Morals of Chess*, 'life is a kind of chess.' Think about it. Everything in life is caused by either action or inaction. On the chess board, each move a player makes has an effect on the other player. It causes the opponent to think and react with a move.



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Children can have trouble accepting responsibility for their actions or considering consequences before making a move. This is because the notion of responsibility comes with the idea of control. If a person believes he can control his life, his fate and create his world by virtue of his actions, or inactions, then he can take full responsibility.

A young person, however, experiences very limited control over his own life. Teachers at school tell him what to do; parents at home set boundaries, rules and physical restraints. A child has no financial freedom, limited geographic mobility and very little decision-making power over his own life. For most children, the world is a place in which they are affected by people

and things around them, but few realise they have an impact on the world.

Chess, however, teaches them that the world doesn't control them and that they have the ability to make a difference to their own lives. Sure, the rules in chess are not negotiable, yet within and using those rules a child can control the entire world – and is the cause of every move.

When a player makes a bad decision, he learns from it and tries again. If he makes a good decision he gets the reward. Chess, in the end, is about decision, choice and responsibility. Most important of all, however, chess is fun, just as life should be. Imagine the possibilities if every child could play chess, just once a week, and uncon-

sciously learn the lessons of responsibility that the game teaches.

Chess, as an ongoing component of the curriculum, is truly an integrated activity that covers all key learning areas. It leads to improved performance in all fields of endeavour and develops life skills and attitudes that can often be difficult to teach. If educators want the best for children, then the teaching of chess has to be a serious consideration.

David Cordover is CEO of Chess Kids. For seminars, coaching, school or individual programs, call 1300 424 377 or visit www.chesskids.com.au

Image courtesy Chess Kids.

CHESS PROVIDES MULTIPLE BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS, SAY VICKI MACKRELL AND ANNA RIDDELL.

Chess at Doncaster Primary School

Chess classes began at Doncaster Primary School, Melbourne, about five years ago as a lunchtime club for interested children. When it was introduced to all Year 3s there was a great deal of interest.

There are huge benefits to learning and playing chess. Above all it develops the mind and the mental abilities used throughout life. It helps to develop problem solving, abstract reasoning, strategic planning, pattern recognition and creativity. It goes across language and cultural barriers. Chess also builds confidence and promotes a sense of self-worth, and allows both boys and girls to compete in a fair playing field.

The earlier chess is begun, the more quickly and easily children will develop the higher-order thinking skills. Its promotion of self-confidence and success from the beginning translates into all aspects of the child's development. It allows children to rise above self-doubt and experience competition in a non-threatening way. All these things help to establish a positive self-image and firmly entrench a set of values and fairness that will be incorporated into all aspects of children's lives.

We have quite a few children who are funded through a disability and impairment program. Several of these children particularly love their chess sessions. They often find social interaction threatening and avoid engagement where possible. They respond really well to the patterns and structure of chess and have become most successful players. This has increased the respect and admiration of the other children. Our children with a disability or impairment will be quite animated and involved in their discussions and participation in chess with the other children. In other social circumstances they're more withdrawn and introverted. It's a real pleasure to see their excitement and involvement with both the game and the other children.

Chess transcends all ages, cultures, sexes and languages. It's challenging at all levels of play. It has had proven a positive impact on students' mathematical, English and problem-solving abilities. Incorporating it into the mainstream program at some stage throughout the week should be a high priority.

Vicki Mackrell, is the principal of Doncaster Primary School, Melbourne.

Chess at Tintern Girls Grammar School

Chess classes have been going at Tintern Girls Grammar School, Melbourne, for two terms as a special activity for Year 4s, with Year 5 girls added soon after. It has helped not only thinking skills but also aspects of personal communication and expression.

We've found that the girls at Years 4 and 5 level have easily adapted to the lesson format. Learning strategies in a classroom situation and then applying these skills in games has been most positive. It has also been beneficial to have the classroom teacher join with the chess teacher in these lessons. The girls have enjoyed the whole concept.

One of our girls managed to acquire a medal in the class tournament. This was the first such occasion that she's gained a trophy, and she gained much confidence. It would be advantageous to have exposure from Years 3 to 6. We've begun a recreational club at lunchtime open to all girls in these year levels. **I**

Anna Riddell is the head of junior school at Tintern Girls Grammar School, Melbourne.