

Teaching Kids Chess in Three Lessons:  
Learning Strategies, Handicapping, and Questioning

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The World Chess Federation publishes widely recognized rules of play and special regulations for official tournaments. The most important of these rules are commonly published in a variety of sources and should be understood by any chess teacher. Competent use of these rules should be the eventual goal of any player.

Teaching strategies designed to capture the interest of young children and compensate for their underdeveloped cognitive and observation skills are useful. T-ball teams do not follow the same rules as major league baseball teams. Baseball becomes more complex as players better understand the game and develop skills. Chess should become increasingly more difficult as skills develop without overpowering beginners.

Such teaching strategies are incorporated into the three lessons below. The lessons are designed to help a teacher who understands the common rules of chess captivate the interest of a small group of students, five to eight years in age. The lessons are structured to introduce chess and allow a student to master the basics of the game and gain success quickly. Chess can be intimidating; it should only be fun. If students master the basics at a young age, it will be fun for a lifetime.

Environment:

The ideal setting is a teacher to student ratio no greater than 1 to 6. Chess boards should be set up on a horseshoe table (or similar seating pattern) with the students sitting on the outside of the table and the teacher sitting in the middle. Each student should have his or her own chess board. The teacher will simultaneously play each student and use each board as an instructional tool for the group as a whole.

### Lesson 1

#### **Objectives:**

Set up the chess board. Manipulate the pieces. Identify the ultimate goal of chess. Develop basic knowledge of chess rules.

#### **Procedures:**

1. The teacher will set up the white pieces. Instruct the students to set up the black pieces on the other side of the board as if the pieces were looking in a mirror. The teacher has asked the students to do something impossible but allow the students to work diligently. If a student points out the problem, praise his or her powers of observation. If not, after all of the students have completed setting up their pieces ask, "On which color, pointing to the queen, is this piece setting?" Students should note that the queens are setting on different colors. The two sides of the board are not mirror

images. This activity reinforces the expression, “Queen to her color; black queen is always on the right.” Explain this phrase to the students.

2. One of the goals of learning to play chess is to develop strategic decision making skills. Specifically, the game is over when the King is cornered or when the lesser opponent forfeits the game because the quality of play has degenerated and the outcome is inevitable. Chess is a war of the minds. The pleasure is in outsmarting your opponent.
3. Describe each piece and how it moves. As you describe the pieces, give each a personality. These personalities help a young child to remember how the pieces move. Have each child reflect your movements as you demonstrate. Teachers should exaggerate movements and expressions.

### The Teacher Explains the King and His Court

**The King** – Tell your students, “You are the King.” Hold up the portrait of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger. How do you think this king moved? Accept reasonable answers. You are a powerful king but you are an old fat man. You are wise and powerful but you are slow. Because you are old and fat you can only move one square at a time. Model how the King moves on the board and encourage students to move their kings as well. You, as the king, carefully plan each move within your plan of attack. The game is over when you and your men have no more legal moves.

**The Queen** – Your queen is your most powerful ally. She is much younger and can move farther and faster. Like any good Queen, she can go anywhere she wants to go. Demonstrate the movement of the Queen.

**The Bishop** – Beside the queen and the king are their bishops. Bishops are wise. One stands on black, the other on white. They move in diagonals and can never leave their color. Hundreds of years ago Bishops stayed close to royalty during a battle for many reasons. First, they were men of God but also they were among the few people in the kingdom who could read and write. Move the Bishops as you explain.

**The Knight** – Outside each bishop is a horseman. They are quick and crafty. They may move in any direction. When moving, they jump over the square in front of them and to the diagonal like a horse jumping over a fence. They are the only piece whose feet leave the board. Most classrooms have 12 inch square tiles on the floor. When possible use these tiles as a teaching tool asking students to stand with both feet on one tile and jump over the square in front of them and to that square’s diagonal. This is a fun activity for young children and strongly

reinforces the movement of the knight. Many students find the movement of this piece difficult to master.

**The Rook** – The rooks stand on the corners like the castle towers. They are best used in your defense but can be used to attack. They move in straight lines and are easy to see coming. Remember, castles were always built high on a hill and could be seen from miles away. When you move your rook, you are not tricking anyone. Your opponent can see you coming.

**The Pawn** – The pawns are your peasants. They are poor in power and are often sacrificed early in the game. They cannot capture a man straight forward. Rather, they spring out diagonally as if they were jumping out from behind a bush. At first they have energy and you can choose to bring them out two squares. After their running start, they tire and can only move forward one square at a time. If a pawn survives capture long enough to reach the opposite end of the board, they may then become any other piece of your choosing. Most of the time a king would want a second queen. A wise king takes care of his peasants.

4. After vividly describing the pieces, begin to play a game. The traditional first move of chess is the king's pawn forward two squares. Make that move as you explain to the students that they also may choose to make that move or any other legal move.
5. As you continue to play all the students at the same time, castle at the first opportunity and explain the move to the group. Continue playing until the game is over, explaining the general rules and terms necessary to play.
6. Shake each student's hand when you are finished.

**Evaluation:** The teacher will check for comprehension during the game by watching the student's moves and re-teaching when necessary. Conclude by asking the students to explain why the class should learn to play chess. Reinforce the beneficial reasons including strategic decision making skills.

## Lesson 2

**Objectives:** Respect the difference between World Chess Federation regulations and teaching strategies. Develop analytical thinking skills. Analyze and organize clues to reach a logical conclusion. Examine parts of a whole to see how the parts relate to each other.

**Procedure:**

1. Set up your side and have the students set up their sides but let them pick their color. Remind the students that white always goes first.
2. Explain that while they are in class you apply learning strategies which in effect bend the World Chess Federation's (WCF) rules. While playing someone out of class, students should expect to use WCF rules.

Learning Strategies

- \* Allow the student to take back moves. Students need to manipulate pieces to reveal options before their final decisions. Visualization of options is an advanced skill.
  - \* Call attention to opportunities the students did not take. Resist assuming the student did not see the option, rather assume the child did see the move but chose not to take it.
  - \* Never give a child obvious opportunities to capture your pieces unless it is in your strategic interest. It is important for the teacher to play his or her best. Beat each student if you can as quickly as is reasonable. If you do this, young students will handle defeat as it comes and will take tremendous pride in defeating you later.
3. Teach students to question each move by saying, "If I do this what will she do?" Each time the teacher moves, the child must say, "Why did she do that?" Repeat these questions throughout the game. The student must learn to predict moves to become skilled at chess.
  4. If the game is over quickly, play again. This time ask the student to set the whole board. Let each student pick his or her color. Don't forget to shake each player's hand when a game is over.

**Evaluation:** Observe each student's ability to set up and move pieces. Re-teach when necessary. As you shake the student's hand, complement one thing that he or she did well, and then ask how he or she feels about playing chess.

## Lesson 3

**Objectives:** Assess the value of data. Solve given logic problems through the use of deductive reasoning. Develop in depth knowledge of the value of each piece.

1. Tell each student to set up the board. Remind all students that the idea is to have a good game. There is no pleasure in beating someone over and over easily.
2. Introduce the Walker Handicapping System. Handicapping involves the teacher's removal of her own queen, q's bishop, q's knight, and/or q's rook so that the student and teacher play on more even footing.
3. The student must win the privilege of playing the teacher with more and more pieces.
4. During lesson three continue all the strategies used in lesson two. The student will still need to retract moves. The teacher will still call attention to options not taken by the student.
5. The first time a student beats you, explain that it's your goal to teach each student to play better than you play. Don't forget to shake the student's hand.

**Evaluation:** After a mid-game move, ask the student, "Why did I just do that?" Evaluate the student's answer and see if he or she can provide reasons. Explain your rationale when necessary. Ask the student what he or she likes the most about playing chess? Accept all answers.