

To Chess Mentors
From Jerry Neugarten

Thank you for agreeing to help in the Chess Mentors program. The program is primarily designed to reinforce fundamentals which the kids have been taught in their lessons but don't necessarily apply as well as they can to their own games. Many kids who have been through the Mentors program become their club's strongest players. The program is also designed to strengthen the connection between the community and our chess club.

The kids in the program vary in strength. All of them know how to move the pieces and some chess strategy. Most of them have sat through dozens of large-group lessons which cover the basics, but some may have missed certain lessons and some will, of course, have absorbed more than others. Although there is no set curriculum for the Mentors program, I have attached our curriculum. Feel free to go beyond this material in any way you see fit.

I suggest that you simply let the kids play and comment on their moves. (If only one kid comes to a session, just play against them and comment.) Here are a few basic ideas that we hope you will impart:

The four questions. I try to get kids to ask themselves four questions before every move: 1) Do I have a piece in trouble (that my opponent can capture)? 2) Does my opponent have a piece in trouble (that I can capture)? 3) Why did my opponent move there? (What is he/she trying to do?) and 4) Am I moving to a better square? (safe and better for offense or defense). These questions become internalized over time, but it pays off to ask kids to focus consciously on them until then.

Slow down. The kids' most common mistake is that they play too fast and fail to study their opponent's last move before making their own moves. "Slow down" is the single most common instruction I give them.

Plan and be able to explain. Some kids become frustrated and make moves without having a good reason. I emphasize that they need to have a reason for every move which they can articulate, and remind them frequently that they can always improve their position. They must have at least a short-term plan, and any plan is better than no plan.

Touch-move. Although they have been taught the "touch-move" rule, some of them need to practice it, in part because the rule is strictly enforced at competitions. Some will pick up a piece and waive it around while thinking about where to put it. They shouldn't.

Count. Some of them don't accurately count out what will happen if they initiate a series of captures. There are two aspects to this: the number of attackers vs. number of defenders, and the point values of the pieces likely to be captured. They should all know the point values of the pieces (P=1, N&B=3, R=5, Q=9), but you should double-check.

Defense and watching the whole board. Many of them become preoccupied with offense to the detriment of defense. The converse may also be true, but it is less common. A tip-off is when they move immediately after their opponent moves, without looking carefully at the opponent's move. One suggestion here: remind them often to watch all parts of the board.

Openings. We generally don't teach specific openings, and focus instead on sound opening principles. I suggest that you do the same. Conventional scholastic chess wisdom is that most kids are really not ready for advanced (or "book") openings, which also take more time to teach than they are worth. They should all know to begin by moving their King or Queen's pawn first, then knights before bishops, castle early, etc.

Endgames. The most important endgames for them to master, so they can succeed every time with them, are 1) King and Queen vs. King, 2) King and Rook vs. King, and 3) how to advance and protect a passed pawn. #3 can be very difficult but they should at least have the idea of using their King to block their opponent's King.

Generally speaking: make them talk, shower them with praise when they do something well, be specific when pointing out mistakes, and pepper them with questions about what they are doing. The types of questions I ask are "Do you see a problem on this part of the board if you make that move?" and "Have you counted out what will happen if you begin this exchange?"

I have found that 60 to 75 minutes is the optimal time for a lesson. We are not trying to make them into Masters, but just to get the major kinks out of their games. If your cupboard allows, a snack can be nice.

Please let me know how things are going, especially if any problems arise. I can make some adjustments by talking to these kids and their parents. It may be that some of the student/mentor matches will not work out, in which event I may be able to move people around. But let's not hesitate to cut our losses if the kids don't appear able to pay careful attention. There are other kids in line.

Thanks again. I am excited about this program and very much appreciate your contribution.