

Indian Trail Chess Club: Advice to Coaches

Many coaches know the game but have not managed groups of kids before. If you fall into that group, here are a few thoughts:

- 1) Control the group from the first day. Kids won't learn if the room is noisy or disorderly.
- 2) There will be times when you'll have to simply explain chess concepts to the kids, but teach interactively as much as you can, having them do as much of the work as possible. Raise questions and challenge them for answers. Call on kids who don't volunteer. Knowing they may be called on may help keep them focused.
- 3) If you're having them analyze board positions which contain "best moves" or sequences of moves, ask them first to describe what they see on the board, especially strengths and weaknesses for both sides, before asking for "the answer." Teach them to keep their minds open and flexible without feeling pressed to come up with "the" solution; this is easier for them and will invite them into the process. Encourage free association, and reward them for finding clues which, when pieced together, will lead to the answer you're looking for.
- 4) If they're stuck, ask questions which will help them find the clues you're steering them toward. For example, ask questions such as "Does White's Knight have a problem defending the Queen?" or "Is there anything about Black's position in this corner which may cause Black to lose a piece?" Many coaches feed their students such clues one at a time, and challenge them at each stage, to build suspense.
- 5) Kids farthest from the board and the coach are usually the most disruptive. "Work the room," moving around, getting in behind them sometimes. If you can configure your teaching space, leave aisles open to make this easier.
- 6) When you can, follow the rule "Say, See, Do." First explain the point. Then show them. Then have them do it themselves. The sooner they practice what you've tried to teach, the more likely the lesson will sink in.
- 7) If things are dragging and your club has a point system, give them points for good answers. That will often wake them up.
- 8) Don't hesitate to repeat lessons or parts of lessons, especially if some time has passed since the last time the material was taught. Many of us need to hear something more than once for it to register. And kids might have missed the lesson the first time it was taught.
- 9) As kids learn, make sure they follow the fundamentals. We encourage our kids to memorize four questions to be asked before every move:

- a) Am I in trouble? (Do I have a piece that can be captured, or is there a mate threat?)
- b) Is my opponent in trouble? (same questions).
- c) Why did my opponent move there? and
- d) Am I sure I'm moving to a better square, and one which is safe? (This is more complicated, as "better" can mean a lot of things, but it reinforces the need to be able to explain every move.)

At a certain point, these questions become automatic, but encouraging kids to ask them consciously avoids many a careless blunder.

- 10) Every teaching group has kids at different skill levels. Make sure that a part of every lesson is aimed at everyone in the group. For example, although many coaches like to "aim above the middle," be sure to include some easy material for your less advanced kids, and some hard material for those who are more advanced. Learning is always a percentage proposition, but every kid should "connect" with at least part of your lesson.