

THE ASHWA SCHOOL OF CHESS

MOBILE- 9884407991

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The advantages of playing chess are listed below.

**SOCIAL:**Chess builds inter-personal skills through game playing and encouraging dynamic interaction.

**PHYSICAL:** Chess involves controlling oneself physically particularly impulsiveness for extended periods of time.

**ACADEMIC:** Chess involves a whole range of cognitive skills including analysis, planning, forward thinking, memory and a knowledge of history.

**CREATIVE:** Chess involves imagination, thinking creatively, and the ability to find the best move under pressure.

**EMOTIONAL:**The program focuses on resilience building through a mind sport.

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Educational Benefits of Chess

Chess helps you focus. When you are a kid, you have energy bubbling around, but when you are playing chess, you have to channel that energy into focus”

The key benefits of chess can be broken broadly down into two main areas: Educational and Social.

One of the key educational benefits is raised IQ scores. There have been a number of studies which have proven the benefits of chess in terms of results. Playing chess had a significant increase in both memory and verbal reasoning skills, especially amongst the more competitive players.

A study in the early 90’s in New Brunswick, Canada, using 437 fifth graders split into three groups, experimenting with the addition of chess to the maths curriculum, found increased gains in the maths problem-solving and comprehension proportionate to the amount of chess in the curriculum. Also in New Brunswick, chess was added to the curriculum in a program called Challenging Mathematics. This uses chess to teach logic and problem-solving from grades 2 to 7. Their average problem-solving ability increased from 62% to 81%. As a consequence the province of Quebec has the highest maths grades in Canada and Canada scores better than the USA on international mathematics exams.

When we play a game of chess we learn that we need to concentrate and focus on the game. This increases as we improve our skills, and play longer games – some games can even last as long as 5hrs. Even at a basic level where students play for about half an hour, they find they can block out everything else and focus solely on the board and pieces. This is of course is invaluable during their school work where concentration and focus are needed.

When students are taught to play chess, they not only learn the moves but also patterns that are created. By remembering these patterns they are sharpening their memories, and this helps them in all areas of learning. Indeed such is the power of chess with regards to memory that it has been proved to help ward off Alzheimer’s disease in the elderly.

Now the improvement of reading skills might come as a bit of a surprise, however when students learn to play, they regularly have to describe moves using coordinates and when they reach a slightly higher level, they have to write down their moves as well – both of these have a positive influence on reading skills. A study in The Bronx between two classes in each of five schools shows that pupils who undertook chess lessons obtained significantly higher reading scores at the end of the year when compared to the control group – which actually did more reading during the time that members of the other group were doing chess.

Mathematics is where the biggest link between chess and education can be seen. Many of the various modalities of thinking involved are shared between the two. We’ve already touched on the coordinates when concerned with the reading side of things, but of course as we’re sure many, if not all of you know, that coordinates and grids also form a part of the NAPLAN testing. In 1992 a study in New Brunswick, Canada, showed that chess, built into a part of the maths curriculum significantly raised the problem solving scores of the students, when compared to the students who undertook the regular maths curriculum.

A game of chess means students need to employ a level of creativity in their chess to solve problems encountered during the game. Creativity and the ability to come up with moves which don’t seem to make sense to the untrained eye, is something that is developed over time and enhanced by chess. Similarly, critical and original thinking is important in chess, using rationality to make decisions based upon possible scenarios and outcomes. Once again, the synergy with education are there – students need to be able to utilise various types of thinking in their school work.

Logical and sequential thinking are also encountered in chess and are possibly the two most important aspects when calculating combinations. Sequential thinking comes into practice when having to plan ahead and working out sequences (which can get very complex when we consider the increase in possibilities after each move), whilst logical thinking is used when reacting to opponents’ plans, and working out our own at each and every turn. Obviously these two attributes are both heavily linked to maths where using logic is important and the ability to work through problems sequentially becomes invaluable.

Decision making is the cornerstone of chess. Every move requires a decision and the ability to choose the best option will determine how you go in a game of chess. This mimics many aspects of school work, and life in general where decision making is of the utmost importance. Chess teaches students to narrow down the possibilities and think rationally about the options in order to come to the best decision. As an aside of decision making, consequences get brought into the equation. For every bad move or poor decision in a game of chess there is a consequence. This is similar to life where for each decision there is a good or bad consequence – at an extreme level a bad decision might lead to serious repercussions in the judicial system. At a normal level, a consequence could be such as time out due to bad behaviour and so on. Chess helps teach students that for each decision there will be a consequence – and at least when playing chess, perhaps the worst consequence is that we lose the game.

**Michael Coman from Fernvale SS** says;

“The Chess Programme at Fernvale State School has been extremely successful on a number of levels over the last fifteen years.

Not only has chess provided a further avenue for our gifted and talented children to express themselves, but it has also provided an opportunity for other children to shine in an academic and competitive pursuit.  We feel the chess programme has challenged and motivated children through participation in interschool and intraschool competitions. Many children have experienced great success in representing their school/house team at these events.

It has encouraged risk taking in a safe environment and creates an enjoyable problem solving environment with a strong emphasis on good sportsmanship.  We have found instances where children with learning difficulties have succeeded over the chess board, and, this in turn, has helped them to achieve in the regular literacy and numeracy activities of their classroom.”

**Sue Refalo-Dyson from Homebush SS** says;

“Chess is an excellent low cost, all ages, all weather activity that everyone can participate in.  The educational benefits of being a chess player are many and include honing analytical thinking skills and aiding memory retention. It’s a great confidence builder and teaches patience and persistence.

Apart from the educational benefits, our students have great fun in our school-based Chess Club, competing in intra-school and inter-school tournaments, making new friends, improving their games and achieving personal bests. We love it!”

**Max Condon from Anglican Church Grammar School** says;

“The pursuit of wisdom is the essence of education. Wisdom is the combination of knowledge experience and sound character. Chess provides us with a vehicle to develop the character of our young men. Chess teachers our young men, patience, self-control, Humility, how to deal with loss and disappointment is a non-threatening and controlled environment. This resilience is highly transferrable to all other areas of life because it is stored as character. We are introducing Chess seamlessly into the curriculum because of these benefits and to encourage strategic thinking when solving problems. As an aside this focus on Chess within and out of the curriculum has dramatic effect on our school Chess team’s popularity and competition success.”

Now we move onto the social benefits of chess.

As mentioned before, when playing a game of chess we learn about actions (or moves in this case) and consequences. What chess also helps teach students is all about winning and losing. Sportsmanship is a vital part of chess and students are taught early on about how to react when they win a game and to think about the feelings of the opposing players. Indeed, one of the best things we see frequently at tournaments is a winning player showing the opponent what they could have done, helping them improve. On the flip side, we teach them that when they lose a game, they are in fact gaining more knowledge so we don’t regard it as losing. Over the years we have seen many students at first ‘spit the dummy’ over a lost game, but learn to accept this and get on with the next one. As an example, our Director of Operations can recall a number of times when his former chess coach would tell people how when he was little, he would send the pieces flying across the room for being told he was wrong, let alone losing a game. He soon learnt this was counter-productive! Now, whilst obviously we don’t like losing, we accept it’s a part of the game and life in general and must get on with things.

Learning to interact socially is another great aspect of chess, particularly for students who may have behavioural or learning difficulties, and especially those on the autism spectrum. Students are able to learn to interact socially with others in a non-threatening environment. We have seen countless examples where students who have struggled to make friends, and over time have learnt to interact with others, using chess as a medium. Go to any big tournament and you will see players of any age talking about variations and the endless possibilities and this teaches individuals to listen to others, to give their point of view and of course to simply interact.

Further to this, chess allows players to develop friendships with other players, regardless of whether they are in the same class, the same school or from a different one, in the same state or even same country! Heading along to interschool tournaments and seeing kids mingling with others from different schools gives us a buzz every time we run a tournament. As a further example, many chess players will form solid bonds of friendship and remain steadfast friends regardless of whether the players live in the ACT, QLD or Amsterdam!

Interschool chess competitions are a great way to develop team spirit and camaraderie. Supporting your school and team mates to victory and cheering them when they win and encouragement when they lose is a great way to continue their social development.

**Lyn Gilmore formerly of Emu Park SS** near Rockhampton says “We are all aware of the mental strengths that chess builds in young minds but I believe playing chess assists in calming students and gives them all the chance to both learn from each other or help each other. I love the fact that any Emu Park student plays a game with whomever is the next one to enter the room, no matter their age or even if they don’t know each other.

The students here can also earn the right to be called a ‘teacher’ and get a “Chess is cool” wrist band. These bands are highly sought after and the students then can’t wait for a ‘new’ person to come along so they can help them to learn the game.

We have even offered community chess afternoons and our students are quite blown away to be able to play a game of chess with an adult. The other opportunities for our better players are the chances to go to the Interschool Tournaments each term and the students absolutely love these outings too.

All in all I can’t speak highly enough of the visible and invisible benefits of chess, your school should get started on the journey.”

Chess is one of the mostly widely available games or sports in the world. As **International Chess Master and journalist Malcolm Pein** says “There is no other activity that costs so little to organise and that cuts across so many barriers. Age, sex, race, religion … they mean nothing in chess. Anyone can enjoy it. Around 500 million people in 167 countries play the game and only football can rival that”.

Chess allows students to develop self-esteem and indeed provides an extra avenue to shine for some students. Unfortunately, not all students are gifted athletes and gifted academically. Chess allows anyone the chance to excel if they put their mind to it. Even students who perhaps play in a tournament and win only one game – that one game can mean the world to them and keep them excited for a long time to come. The benefit of this increase in self-esteem is that the students feel they can achieve, and this can in turn help benefit their own schoolwork at many levels. Going back to the 80’s, William Levy, when conducting research, noted that “chess consistently promoted self-esteem after a year of exposure. Many students self-image improved dramatically”. We would argue that this is a massive benefit when we consider than in today’s society self-image is a major problem for many children and particularly teenagers.

CHESS IN SCHOOL SUPPORTED BY EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament adopted the Written Declaration “Chess in School” in 2012. The EP’s declaration has an aim to bring attention to chess as a teaching tool to schools because it directly contributes to academic performance and makes kids smarter, better critical thinkers, better problem solvers, and more independent decision makers while they enjoy themselves.

As a new step in the “Chess in Education” efforts Judit Polgar, Garry Kasparov and President of the European Chess Union, Silvio Danailov has recently met the EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Mrs. Androulla Vassiliou, in Brussels.

During the meeting Mrs. Vassiliou expressed her satisfaction with the big progress of the European Chess Union concerning the project “Chess in school” and the big support which the Written Declaration had received by the MEPs in the EU Parliament.

The Eu Parliament also says that chess can “help social cohesion and contribute to policy objectives such as social integration, combating discrimination, reducing crime rates ane even the fight against various addictions. It further helps improve children’s concentration, patience and persistence and can develop the sense of creativity, intuition, memory, and analytical and decision-making skills as well as teaching determination, motivation and sportsmanship.”

In 1999 the International Olympic Committee also recognised chess as a sport and even had exhibition games held at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, organised by Graeme Gardiner.

Chess is also a part of the curriculum in many countries (and these are but a select few): Armenia, Paraguay, Belgium, Venezuela, Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Zaire, parts of the USA and Canada and also the Mt Alexander cluster in Victoria.

With regard to the Paraguayan Bill, Deputy Juan Antonio Denis, draftsman, argued for the document highlighting the importance of its application compulsory in the Basic School Education cycles, so they can help develop the student’s creative thinking, to develop visual memory overall and intellect.

Now for a case study:

Winters Flat PS in Castlemaine, Victoria is a part of a program which is currently conducting research into the benefits of chess in the education system. Whilst much of the program is still being researched and isn’t available for broadcast, we can certainly use the available information to help build a solid case for chess being taught in schools.

At Winters Flat, chess is taught to all year 2 to 6 students as one of the 5 dedicated maths lessons each week. Chess is not just and add-on but a dedicated part of the curriculum.

***Also from the Winters Flat website is their take on Chess and mathematics.***

***Chess & Mathematics***  
If we reduce mathematics to algorithms, numbers and equations in the classroom we are falling far behind global best practice in mathematics. Mathematics is more than equations and numbers. Mathematics is pattern recognition and analysis of patterns.

Chess is a game of prediction, calculation and pattern recognition. Predicting consequences and pattern recognition are key elements of mathematics and chess.  
Winters Flat has developed a mathematics based chess program where the mathematical concepts embedded in the game of chess are used to teach maths and facilitate student’s development.

Winters Flat builds numeracy and mathematical thinking into its class tournament structures which involves using regrouping, simplification by cancellation, addition, subtraction, embryonic algebra, measurement and area, and geometric problem solving. Chess notation and problem solving involves using the co-ordinate plane which is used in map reading, geography and graphs.

The graphs above illustrate the results of the students undertaking testing each year from 2005 through to 2009. Chess was introduced in 2007 so there are two years of historical comparisons available.

What we can see from the data is that in 2006 there were 36% of students below average and this percentage decreases as students continue with the chess program. Conversely, students in the above average section went from 14% in 2006 up to a peak of 48% in 2008.

The shift is remarkable and demonstrates the power of chess achieved through Winters Flat PS conducting their 1 session per week as part of the maths curriculum.