

Psychological Preparation for Children Playing in Chess Tournaments

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When I first thought of this topic, I was only thinking about preparing children to play in chess tournaments. However, the more I got into the matter, the more I realized that it isn't just the children who need some psychological preparation. The adults in the room—the parents, coaches and tournament directors—also need to give a lot of thought to their own emotional states, influences on and investments in the proceedings. So before I get to the children, I'd like to address some adult issues.

Before I became a professional chess teacher and coach, I was a volunteer parent coach at my children's school. There was a third grade student on the team who wanted to play the exchange variation of the Spanish. It was clear that he didn't understand a lot of the ideas of the variation, so I offered to give him a couple of private sessions. When showing the pin variation, where Black offers up a bishop sacrifice in exchange for a devastating attack, we got to the key position and I asked if he could safely take the bishop. He patiently studied the position and, after about five minutes proudly announced that the bishop should not be taken. He then proceeded to give me a verbal rundown of the moves leading to mate. Two weeks later at the national tournament in Nashville, that position arose in his very first game. He was all keyed up and excited, and instantly snapped off the bishop, going down to an ignominious defeat several moves later.

He was of course the first one back to the team room. He had tears in his eyes, and was trembling—as I soon realized—with fear. His father, a 1500 player himself, ripped the score sheet from his son's hand, saw what had happened, and in a frightening display of temporary insanity, grabbed his son, lifted him in the air and snarled in his face, "How could you be so #@\$# stupid!" The rest of us stood in stupefied shock.

Second story, again at a national tournament. Last round. My team was in contention for a top five place. On two boards we were clearly winning. One was a total slaughter, the other was an easy victory. Suddenly both players, as if they timed it together, stood up and starting blitzing out moves. Their pieces started falling like raindrops in a storm and they both lost miserably. We fell from third to ninth. It was three days before I could overcome my inner fury to say anything to either of them.

Third story. Another national tournament. A coach from another team was at the table giving last minute encouragement to his player. He asked my student if he could look at his scoresheets from the previous rounds. Rather ingenuously, my boy complied. After a quick perusal, the coach derisively threw the book down on the table and told his player, in a loud voice, “He’s a fish. You can beat him easily.” My boy then played the most craven game of his career and quickly lost.

The fourth story is from the New York City Chess Championships. A girl on my team was winning her final game. Victory makes her City Champion. Her opponent started acting sick, and asked her for a draw. She said no. He persisted, saying he didn’t feel well. She said no again. He raised his hand for a TD. One came over and the boy said he was sick and wanted a draw. The TD told her she should be a good sport and give him the draw. She said no again. He said she wasn’t being fair, and she should take the draw. Finally she succumbed to the pressure and said OK. She came in third on tie breaks, and our team placed second on tie breaks. Had she won, she would have been the individual city champion and our team would have been clear first. Ten minutes later the allegedly sick child was running all over the place, laughing and playing tag with his friends in the hotel hallway.

Story number five. One of my students lost a game, and the checkmate was quite interesting. The TD overseeing that section called his friends

over to look at the position, and they all had a good time laughing about all the horrors that had befallen my student's beleaguered king. They completely ignored the fact that they were laughing at something that was painful to a seven year old still sitting in front of them.

What was going on in all these stories/situations? The father in the first story had invested too much of himself in his son's achievements. Rather than allow his son the freedom to make his own mistakes and learn from them, he gave in to his rich fantasy life of imagining his son as the perfect embodiment of all he thought he would have been, given his son's opportunities. When reality clashed with that fantasy, he came completely unglued.

In the second story, I had visions of breaking into the elite ranks of the top five for the first time, and when that vision was dashed by what I regarded as the totally ridiculous actions of my students, I lost it. Although I knew enough not to berate them—which is what I wanted to do—I am sure my silence was seen as almost equally rough on them.

The third story, of the intimidating coach, is a clear case of destructive behavior. If a child is your enemy, there is something seriously wrong with your approach to your job. Yes, we all want to win, but the person across from your student is a child. We, the adults, are supposed to be nurturers, not destroyers. If victory is that important, stay away from children.

As for the TD, I have nothing good to say about him. Learn the rules and apply them appropriately. The young girl he deprived of a well-deserved victory in the third story was angry and distraught for days. Her parents, one of whom could charitably be called a tiger mom, were

equally upset at the obvious dereliction of justice. This was one of several such incidents that eventually drove this phenomenally talented girl from the game.

The TDs in the last story could be forgiven as chess players for being so engrossed in a fascinating position, but a little more awareness (what's that?) would be good.

Frankly, I think we should have special training sessions in ethical behavior for coaches, parents and tournament directors, but I don't see that happening anytime soon. So before I turn to the questions and issues regarding preparing children, let me just lay the framework for what I think will solve many of the problems I alluded to above.

A friend and fellow coach who gives private lessons to some of the students at a school that is a perennial rival to Dalton told me the parents at that school, which shall be nameless, are rabidly focused on beating Dalton. We are the enemy. He asked if I had a similar idea in my preparation to play them. I told him, "Absolutely not." He asked what my approach was. It is really very simple. I want my students to love chess. We have many opponents, but no enemies. They may not like us, they may even dislike or revile us, but I will not return the favor, nor will I tolerate it in any of the students or parents at my school. It takes two (or more) to make a fight, and this is one I do not want to engage in. Our battle is on the board and only on the board. No child is my enemy. Of course I want to win, but only by having my students make better moves on the board, not by vilifying another school or the children who happen to go to a different school. I teach my students to appreciate good moves, no matter who makes them. If your opponent makes a good move, that means you have to find a good response; good moves

by our opponent bring out the best in us. I want mental toughness, not a vitriolic name-calling contest. Bear in mind we are still talking about children, ages five to ten or eleven. We're not talking about a college football rivalry here.

Parents and coaches need to understand and accept, not just intellectually but deep in their visceral being, that it is normal for young children to do foolish things, to make huge mistakes, to make incomprehensible errors. The parent's job is to give the child a reassuring hug and say you love them. The coach's job is to analyze the mistake and, more importantly, assess the level of disturbance the child feels at his or her error, and either work on it then and there if the child is up to it, or give the child a little space, tell him to go wash his face, relax, and we'll talk about it later.

Above all, lay no blame. The children are under tremendous pressure at these tournaments, and we need to lighten that pressure as much as possible. We also need to protect the children in our care. When getting your child situated to play, I now tell the parents not to leave the playing area as long as the parent or coach of the opposing player is there. And above all, be a good role model for both your child and the other player.

The human mind is a complex entity, to say the least. In the long evolution of our brains and our coping mechanisms, we needed something that could sense danger immediately and give us an instantaneous response to possible life-terminating threats. The part of the brain that does this is a little thing called the amygdala, which we share with pythons. When danger of any sort enters our domain, the thalamus gets the sensory information and immediately routes it over to the amygdala. The amygdala puts the body on red alert if it senses

danger of any sort. The thalamus also sends its sensory news to the hippocampus, which is where we have our various memory stations. This is where we classify information to see where it will go next. So what if the information coming in has no reference point for classification? Or if the reference point is recognized as potentially damaging? The amygdala rules.

The emotions of anxiety and fear take over. The frontal lobe of the brain, the last to develop both evolutionarily and in the maturation of individual humans, where rationality and reason rule, has no chance to step in and calm things down. In brief, this is why teachers give an upset student a ‘time out.’ When a child at a chess tournament is in emotional turmoil, it is pointless to expect rational responses. I recently came across a great quote: “What was arrived at through emotion cannot be dispelled by reason.” Wash the little face, give a drink of water, a hug, and some reassuring words and deal with things later. Quite frankly, there are times that coaches and parents should also take a time out.

So now let us look at some of the child-induced triggers to these emotional states. I should make it clear that I am here addressing issues that apply primarily to children at the elementary school level. By the time the students are playing in the Junior High and High School tournaments, they are often seasoned warriors of the mind, their brains have matured a bit more, and the issues I am addressing here have fallen largely by the wayside.

We all know that there are tens of thousands of patterns in chess. We spend countless hours in helping our students learn these patterns as they apply to openings, middle games, and endings. We work on tactical patterns, pawn structure patterns, checkmate patterns and others till we are blue in the face.

What many of us in the coaching field either ignore or give short shrift to are the all-important patterns of behavior that young children can and will engage in as the pressures of tournament play loom. Some of these patterns are good for the children, some are neutral, and some are just flat-out inappropriate and damaging.

Identifying and dealing with these inappropriate and damaging patterns is as important in preparing children for tournament play as the more technical and creative chess ideas we all strive to impart. Letting them know ahead of time about these patterns (also a pattern) can help tremendously.

These patterns are as knowable as the patterns on the chessboard, and for the sake of our children's wellbeing, we should learn them and find ways to help the children in our care deal with them in healthy and appropriate ways. Children are infinitely creative in finding specific nuances to these patterns, but in spite of all their creative interpretations, the basic forms are still recognizable.

What are some of the patterns that are likely to cause stress and discomfort in the young children? There are two broad categories: what children do to each other and what they do to themselves. Let me just quickly enumerate some that I have seen over the years, and then we will cover how to deal with them.

Intimidating or obnoxious behavior prior to the game.

I once had a nice gentle little boy sit across from his opponent with the usual butterflies in the stomach before the first game at a national tournament. His opponent—these are second graders—

immediately started firing out math questions. “I bet you don’t know the square root of 144. You probably don’t even know what 25 times 50 is.” He kept peppering my poor bewildered little one with this line of mathspeak until tears came into his eyes. These were not really questions. They were intimidating accusations of deplorable stupidity on the part of my poor boy. It worked. He refused to even play the game.

I’m the state champion. You don’t have a chance in this game. I beat everybody and I’m going to beat you too.

My rating is 300 points higher than yours. I hope you don’t cry when you lose.

Intimidating, obnoxious behavior during the game.

Standing up and smashing pieces down on every move.

Kicking the opponent under the table.

Obnoxious noises during the game.

Constantly asking for a draw from a losing position.

Telling the opponent to hurry up on every move (or any move).

Talking.

Once one of my little third grade girls was playing a very large seventh grade boy at a tournament. The boy didn’t just talk to her, he was whispering outrageously vulgar things to her.

Breaking the rules.

One of the most difficult to deal with, which I will cover in detail in a moment, is the violation of the touch move rule. A child touches a piece, or even worse, actually picks it up, then denies ever having contact with it. Naturally the offender gets away with this more often than not. The injustice of this can completely unravel an unprepared student.

Claiming a checkmate when it is only check.

Claiming stalemate when there are other pieces that can move.

Playing with the clock. This does not happen so often now that nearly everyone is using the digital clock, but with the old analogue clocks, I have seen children actually reach back and alter the time.

Unethical behavior

I'll give you \$20 to let me win.

I recently heard a story of a girl who was easily winning. Her opponent, another girl, said that her mother would beat her if she lost. The girl with the winning position, in an act of naïve altruism, threw the game. When she came out and told her mother what had happened, her mother said she did the right thing. Then her coach heard the story and had a rather different—and angry—reaction. He said the girl was duping her, and she fell for it. The girl was crushed, and didn't play again for two years.

Losing.

This is the tough one, and fear of losing is essentially at the bottom of all these other behaviors.

So how do we prepare our children for these events?

We all have to come up with our own systems and ideas that work with who we are and our style of teaching and coaching. What follows are my particular solutions to these problems. If you find anything here useful, please make it your own. As creative individuals, you will all come up with your own variations on these, or come up with your own solutions that may be at complete variance with these suggestions. The only requirements, to my mind, are that they help the child and do not harm others.

So let's discuss each of these.

Intimidating behaviors.

I tell my students that there is only one reason people do try to intimidate you: they are afraid of you. So when you hear someone tell you they are rated several hundred points higher than you, or that they are the state champion or their father is a grandmaster, or they say you are stupid because you can't name all the countries and their capitals for sub-Saharan Africa, just smile inside and tell yourself that this person is afraid of you. And they should be. Then tell yourself that you will not let this bully beat you, that you are going to examine every move, look for every weakness, think about the consequences of your intended move before you make it, and not let up for an instant. You will be

totally focused throughout the entire game. And when it is over you will shake your opponent's hand and not say anything nasty or negative. I want you to not just give them a lesson in chess, but also in how a decent human being behaves.

Obnoxious behavior during the game.

This one has an easy solution, but can be difficult to get the children to do. The solution to every instance, whether it is touch move, kicking under the table, trash talking, repeatedly asking for draws, making noises or anything else, is to simply raise your hand and get a tournament director over. Explain calmly and quietly what is wrong and let the TD take care of the problem. If the problem persists, raise your hand again. And again and again if necessary. If you are not satisfied with what the TD says or does, ask to see your coach. That is your right.

The key to making this work is to convince the children before the games start that the tournament is based on rules, and that there are a lot of adults there to protect you from people who break the rules. When you are in the tournament hall, the first line of protection is the TD. A lot of children are afraid to say anything that might cause trouble, so they are reluctant to bring a TD over to the table. I like to ask what they think the TD or the child will do if they say something about disturbing behavior. It often transpires that they are afraid of the child, or they imagine the TD will not listen to them. I then ask them to look around the room they are in now, where they can see their friends, parents and coaches. I ask if they think there is any way any of us will let anyone hurt them. That generally gets a good giggle, and with a little more affirmation, they usually feel pretty good going into the tournament hall. The children must know that they have a lot of back-up; even though

they are removed from parents and coaches in that huge tournament hall, they are not alone.

Breaking the rules during the game.

Touch move is the one I see most often, and is a difficult one to deal with because the problem here is verification. In a large number of cases, it is impossible to verify that the person touched a piece. The TD will then be in the awful position of trying to determine who is telling the truth, a decidedly difficult proposition. Baring a credible witness, the TD will most often have to rule in favor of the person who denied touching the piece. As I like to point out, this is necessary because if I could make my opponent move a particular piece several times in a game just because I said he touched it, I could beat anyone in the world (those who know my skill level will recognize that this is in fact the only way I could beat any chess professional.)

So we have to begin by recognizing that the liar will probably get away with it. Nevertheless, always raise your hand and get the TD over to make the complaint. If you lose the argument—and you probably will—at least you are on record with a complaint against this player. Tell the TD you understand why he had to rule that way, but the fact is the person did touch the piece. Then ask if he can keep an eye on the game. Raise your hand for every infraction. The second or third time it may stick.

But now what? A rule has been broken, and the malefactor gets off scot free. I like to tell my students that the worst that can happen to them is that their opponent now has the opportunity to make a good move, and that is what we want them to do. We want them to challenge us, to make us think, make us prove we know more about chess than they do.

I then tell stories of great players who were angry when their opponents deprived them of the opportunity to play a great continuation, either through a blunder or resignation. There is no particular glory in beating someone who plays a bunch of bad moves.

The important thing here is to keep them from flying into a self-righteous rage and not being able to focus on the game at hand.

I think it is also very important here to tell the students that now that you know the touch move rule is often broken with impunity, under no circumstances is anyone on our team to violate this rule. No trophy, no title, is worth your integrity. In this microcosm of the real world, we learn to take responsibility for our actions. If you intentionally touch a piece, you must find the best place you can to move that piece. You may not lie about it, no matter how painful the result. A game won by deceit will never be satisfying.

Not recognizing that the check is not mate or that other units can move so the position is not stalemate are things that young children have to be warned of beforehand so they can take a moment at the board to really assess the position before agreeing to what it is. I tell stories of children this has happened to so they will know that they really have to look at the final positions every time. I once had a student fall victim to this error twice in one tournament.

Unethical behavior.

When you come to a chess tournament, both players sit down with the clear knowledge that, unless the game is a draw, one will win and the other will lose. We came here to play. If you get sick and cannot continue, you lose. If you don't show up, you lose, it doesn't matter

why. If your opponent starts crying, well, that's too bad, but he knew the risk when he sat down. It is up to the child's parent and/or coach to deal with the tears; it is not your job to throw a game to let someone feel better. Then you are the one who loses. If your opponent has a problem of any sort, it is not your problem. We play with good sportsmanship, we adhere to the rules and show respect for the person across the board. But we have no mercy during the game. We came to win, as did our opponent. We want to win with a checkmate, not a bribe. Agreeing to take money is not only morally reprehensible; you will never see the twenty bucks, and reporting only confirms your complicity. We only lose by a hard-fought checkmate. For everything else, the answer is, no.

Losing.

This last one can be the most difficult of all, which is too bad because it happens so often.

I like to tell the children that their job is to stay focused every move, do perfect notation, and come back and let us go over the game. They always giggle a little when I say that if you lose, your parents will still love you, your teammates will still respect you, I will continue to help you and you will still get dinner tonight and breakfast tomorrow morning.

I frequently stress that failure is not a definition of who you are, it simply shows us what we need to work on. If you lose a game, or even all of them, it is my job to help you. And I will. Your value as a person does not rise and fall with your performance on the chessboard.

I don't really want to see someone who carries this too far, smiling as they say, "it's just a game." Losing should mean something. We've all

heard the bromide, “show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.” However, that also takes things too far. A good loser, to me, is someone who shows respect for the opponent all the way through, maintains outward courtesy with a final handshake and congratulations to the winner, and then comes back with steely determination to learn what went wrong and to never make those mistakes again.

In a team setting, it is very important to stress team camaraderie. I tell the children that whatever is good for anyone is good for everyone, and what is bad for anyone is bad for everyone. If a teammate is having a rough time, it is everyone else’s job to come together to support and encourage that person. If someone is winning and you are not, be glad for them. As long as they are winning, that is good for the whole team.

Children are very hierarchical, and that is the source of many of our problems and also of our successes.

The children who indulge in intimidating, obnoxious or unethical behavior want to be at the top of the pecking order and will do anything to get there. They are under the misguided perception that the way to get to the top is to make sure no one else does. They think they can build themselves up by tearing others down. We see examples of them as adults in every walk of life, and frankly, I think that is appalling. You can climb to the top on merit with much more satisfaction and happiness than by entering the dog eat dog world of tearing at others.

The final issue I want to talk about is the damage the children do to themselves; their attitudes going into the games have a lot to do with how they will perform.

The two big ones are fear and an inflated view of their skills. Those who walk in afraid will often play cowardly chess. Those who think they are a second incarnation of Capablanca have a long way to fall when they are beaten.

I had a young girl once who was afraid of losing. She was actually a strong player for her age, but something happened—I still don't know what—at a big tournament and she lost her first three games. I had a big team at the time and couldn't look at everyone's games. A coach I had hired to help at the tournament came up to me after the third round and said that Lisa was playing the worst chess he had ever seen from her. He showed me the games and I nearly fell out of my chair they were so bad. We had about fifteen minutes before the next round, so I put a position from one of her games on the board and called her over. I asked her what black should do in this position. She quickly found a good move. I then made the move she played and asked what she thought of it. She stuck out her tongue in disgust and said it was awful. I asked her why, and she gave a very good analysis. When I told her that was the move she played she just stared blankly.

I asked her if she was afraid of losing. She said yes, with tears beginning to well up in her eyes. I told her it was O.K. She could lose every game in this tournament, and she would still be an important part of the team. “You have my permission to lose. Just not like this! Go out and play Lisa chess. You are a strong player. Now you have a really big advantage for the rest of the tournament: Your next opponent will also have lost three games. There is no way he has a chance against you if you just go play what you know. Now go wash your face, get a drink of water, and do your best.” She won her next four games, and her final point put us in third place at that national tournament.

I had another student who was the darling of his parent's eye, a smart, spoiled first grader who thought he was the best just because he was who he was. He didn't have to work or study, he was perfect and indestructible. Chess has a way of proving otherwise. He was totally shattered when he lost his first three games at a local tournament, and eventually gave up chess.

Had I seen this coming I might have been able to prepare him better, but then again, he may have had too much of the superman complex to overcome. I would encourage parents and coaches to stress the value of work and effort over brains and talent. One of my favorite stories is of a famous cellist who said, "I practice eight to ten hours a day, and they call me a genius."

There is a lot more to say on this subject, but I'd like to conclude with these words: Most of the parents, players and coaches are really terrific people. The issues I have described are things to be aware of, they do happen, but don't go into the tournament hall with a huge chip on your shoulder expecting villainous behavior from everyone else, or miraculous performance from your child without a lot of practice and study.

The more effort you put in, the higher up the mountain you can climb. You may never reach the top, but the higher you go, the better the view. Work hard, enjoy the journey, and the destination will take care of itself.

Let's teach our children to love the game, follow the rules, study hard and often and respect their opponents. Persist with that, and you will get a good result.