

A special issue dedicated to accessibility

CHESS LIFE

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USChess.org



Chess is for



Chess Life

MARCH

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ON THE COVER: **Chess is** **for ALL**

The benefits of chess extend far beyond the board. With this special issue, we introduce you to some of the ways that chess impacts lives. Our intent is to raise awareness and spark a dialogue about how we can work together to create a chess community that is fair, equal, and accessible to all.

Inhibition and Intuition

Chess playing presents benefits for autistic players, scholars and players say *By MENACHEM WECKER*

In a scholarly study slated to appear this year in *Psychology in Russia*, Shahar Gindi—a master and researcher at Israel’s Beit Berl College—sent an online questionnaire to 107 boys. Just over 60 percent of the boys, who were barely shy of 12-years-old on average, played chess, and 55 percent had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Of the latter, fewer than half was on medication, and about a quarter of the 107 participants was in some sort of gifted program.

The research, says Gindi, is the first to show evidence of a connection between chess playing and something called “inhibition,” which is the opposite of impulsivity. Gindi used a “touch-move” task, wherein the boys were given a shape formed by matches and were asked, by moving just three of the matches, to flip the direction of the shape. In one version, the boys couldn’t move a match back and try again, as if they had touched a chess piece and were then obliged to move it no matter how they regretted it in retrospect.

Gindi found a relationship between teenagers’ chess experience and their inhibitory control. Chess players outperformed their non-chess-playing peers in the “touch move” condition of the second test. That was the case regardless of whether the chess players had ADHD. The study doesn’t establish causality, Gindi stresses, but he thinks his results indicate that chess players tend to be less impulsive than non-chess players.

“The link between inhibition and chess is intuitive. The saying ‘When you see a good move, see if you can find a better one,’

attributed to Domenico Lorenzo Ponziani, is well-known in chess history,” Gindi says. “Siegbert Tarrasch, the second best chess player of his time, added: ‘When you see a good move, sit on your hands and see if you can find a better one’—a typical expression of the need for inhibition in chess.”

Gindi’s research is part of a larger body of work, including anecdotal observations of chess coaches who work with young chess players with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and parents of children with ASD, that suggests that there could be particular benefits to and comfort for the children when it comes to playing chess.

“I’d imagine that autistic people might be attracted to chess, because it’s rule-governed, given their strong interest in systems,” says Simon Baron-Cohen a fellow at Cambridge, England’s Trinity College, where he directs the Autism Research Centre, and a past president of the International Society for Autism Research.

In a big-data 2018 paper which studied half a million people, Baron-Cohen and his co-authors found that autistic people tend to score above average in a measure called “systemizing quotient.” Male brains, in a theory called “empathizing-systemizing,” tend to do more of the latter, while females tend to score higher on the former. Empathy is defined as the ability to recognize others’ mental states and respond appropriately on an emotional level, while systemizing is analyzing or building rule-based systems.

“Chess is a good example of systemizing,” Baron-Cohen says.



ABOVE: NIKLAS PALOMINO; BELOW, IM JUSTIN SARKAR

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SUBJECTS

Developing Chess Talent

Dutch psychologist and journalist Karel van Delft and his son, IM Merijn van Delft, an international master, address chess and autism in their 2008 book, *Developing Chess Talent: Creating a chess culture by coaching, training, organization and communication*. An excerpt, translated in 2010 from the original Dutch, follows:

Chess is Suitable for Autists

“Chess is definitely a suitable sport for autists. The rules of the game are clear, there is no physical contact, it’s nice and quiet,” says Heleen Kers from Apeldoorn. Via Heleen, a dozen children of De Ambelt—a school for special education—have joined the school chess club De Schakel. “You can teach them in a normal way, but you must give them individual attention. And the teacher must use straight language.”

In Putten, the “Foundation for Groundbreaking Talents” organizes chess lessons for young people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is done in cooperation with the local chess club PSV DoDo. Initiator Jacqueline van den Brink: “They are often able to think very logically, and this fits in well with chess, which is a game that is very structured and surveyable. Autists are often perfectionists. When playing chess, they have a grip on what they are doing.” The experience of Poulien Knipscheer, a chess trainer and pedagogue from Rotterdam, is that as a trainer you have to express yourself very clearly, and give a lot of information. “To autistic children who learn to play chess, it’s better to explain everything in one go than to introduce the rules and their exceptions step by step.”

Tom Meurs enjoys strategic thinking

Tom Meurs (17) has Asperger’s. This pre-university education student has been playing chess since he was 11. “They needed a player for the school chess team. So I quickly learned the rules, and it was fun.” Soon he became a member of the chess club in Ermelo, and he joined the chess camp of De Schaakmaat at the Open Dutch Youth Championship. Tom trained with the Stichting Bevorderen Schaken

Apeldoorn (Foundation for the Promotion of Chess in Apeldoorn), and now plays in the second team of Homburg Apeldoorn. His Elo rating is 2175. “I want to cross the 2300 mark within a year. I train with IM Yochanan Afek for two hours every week, and via email with IM Tibor Karolyi, with whom I have stayed in Hungary for a week.”

Tom often doesn’t understand exactly what other people mean. “Sometimes I attach too much meaning to it.” An advantage of his Asperger’s Syndrome is that he is good at concentrating. “Especially during trainings. A disadvantage is that during a tournament I sometimes feel less at ease, which is bad for my performance.”

In recent months he has taken up boxing. “That’s a strategic sport. Taking blows, fighting back. You become self-confident, because you have to dare to attack as well. It is very much like chess.”

The nice thing about chess, Tom thinks, is that it is a very strategic game. “It offers you full scope to apply all your understanding and your creativity. You really have to work hard; analyse, make plans, look deeper than your opponent.”

Tom has a tip for chess trainers. “At De Schaakmaat they wanted to slow me down when I had finished Step 4 in one week. Other children finish two pages in a week, but a kid with Asperger’s, who is enthusiastic, can do a lot more. Such kids should be allowed to go ahead.”

His social skills have improved a lot compared with 10 years ago. “Whether this is because of chess, I don’t know. I’ve also learned a lot from the support of my parents.”

Michael Duggan counsels students with disabilities at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, where he is part of Autismerica, a nine-year-old organization for students with autism and their parents. In its monthly meetings, which draw between 50 and 150 people, Autismerica helps students set themselves up to succeed in college and provides social time, including chess,

billiards, ping pong, checkers, and video games.

“Something interesting happened with most of the students who were gaming. They were interacting and socializing. It was primarily about the game they were playing, but every once in a while an effective comment would work its way into the conversation,” Duggan writes in his 2018 book, *First Class Support*

for *College Students on the Autism Spectrum: Practical Advice for College Counselors and Educators*.

For instance, when one student’s character was killed in a video game, another might say it reminded him of how he felt when his math teacher docked him points for turning homework in late. “Or, they would complete

a level, and one would say it was as awesome as the chicken nuggets at the cafeteria. It was interesting how content worked its way into the interactions.”

Playing chess, as well as other board games and video games, can distract kids from other kinds of stressful communication, according to Duggan.

“For those on the spectrum, we know issues like sensory overload and recognizing social cues are already a challenge. But through these types of games, many factors in traditional social interaction are dissipated,” Duggan says. “Eye contact can now be focused on the game, non-verbal language mostly is eliminated, and on a cognitive level, it becomes an assumption the person is processing the game itself, so expectations and standards for interaction change or are dropped.”

Communication, now simplified to just the purest message without outside stressors, is easier for those with autism, and the students also know that their fellow gamers—whether chess or video games—share their interest in the game. “This can take out the frustration of one person having an overdeveloped interest in a certain topic the other person is less than interested in, if interested at all,” Duggan says. “For example, there are no worries about, ‘Does this person care about the mating rituals of penguins in Antarctica?’ because the mutual interest in the game at hand is pre-established.”

While models like Autismerica’s are effective, Duggan says, there is a need for more research on the ways that chess, and other games, can benefit those with autism. He cites one student, whom he calls “John,” who would come to Autismerica events and play chess with his dad. John’s dad wanted him to be there to connect with others like himself, but John didn’t want to go. For a year or two, Duggan would ask John if he could play chess with him rather than his dad, or whether he could pair John with another player. Each time, John shook his head “no.”

One time, John surprised Duggan by saying quietly that he would play someone other than his dad, but only Duggan himself. While the two played and John quickly beat Duggan, John’s dad was able to interact with the other parents. After three or four months of monthly games with Duggan, John said he’d like to play another student instead.

“Thereafter, John would play chess with usually the same three or four students, and over time, he formed friendships with each of them,” Duggan says. “John eventually graduated, but I think the social skills and growth he experienced from chess was both heartwarming and encouraging.” (Karel and Merijn van Delft’s book, *Developing Chess Talent*, excerpted on page 33, also includes case studies, which they claim shows that chess

is a suitable sport for autistic players.)

Justin Sarkar, an international master, shared in the January 2018 edition of *Chess Life* that he has a social condition on the autistic spectrum and that he battles depression. “Words can hardly even describe the impact of chess on me or where I would be without chess,” he said at the time. “The inherent beauty of the game and personal benefits in fighting my illness speak louder than the implicit demands and stresses of chess tournament play, to the point of it

DID YOU KNOW....

Boys are affected by autism four times more frequently than girls.

Approximately one in every 59 children is diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder.

An estimated one-third of people with autism are nonverbal.

Nearly two-thirds of children with autism between the ages of six and 15 have been bullied.

being more like a stress reliever and positive distraction than other things.”

In an email interview, Sarkar says he knows some people with ADHD who benefit from playing chess. Playing chess helped them learn to focus better and to do better in school, he says.

“A benefit of chess play, in general terms, is that it can positively distract me from my struggles outside of chess,” such as practical life and interpersonal communications, he said. “I tend to be less functional outside of tournaments and less confident in my abilities (e.g. ‘social skills’), so playing chess can boost my self-esteem and remind me ‘what I do well.’ While chess is strictly speaking ‘just a game,’ somehow it has become an art. Or, artistic expressive outlet. Or, simply a means to hopefully someday better discover my worth to others as a person.”

Chess, and Sarkar’s ability to play it well, helps him tackle his depression—which affects his memory, speed in completing tasks, and decision making—head on.

“Tournament play not only puts me into some kind of rhythm but also creates a certain sense of purpose and peer connections, along with getting to travel to many different places,” he says. “Chess tournament play is great therapy. Play a good game and nothing else seems to matter for awhile. I have to keep discovering this.”

The chess world welcomes people with social challenges, in Sarkar’s experience. A diverse group of people, of various ages, backgrounds, and gender, play chess, and they all speak the same “language” in a sense. Even playing chess with others from Russia or China, who don’t speak English well, doesn’t disrupt the game’s smoothness, to Sarkar.

“I even occasionally run into players with clearly-visible disabilities, such as needing a wheelchair, or even, religious restrictions, like not being allowed to write or press the chess clock, during the Sabbath,” he adds. “Even such things, directors and other players try to somehow accommodate within reason.”

Ana Luengo Palomino, an assistant professor in the modern languages and literatures department at San Francisco State University, has spoken publicly about her chess-playing son Niklas, who is autistic.

Niklas first tried playing chess in the first grade against other students, and he later played in his school’s chess club, he tells *Chess Life*, in answers to questions that his mom shared. “I did not completely understand the rules at first, and it took some time before I was able to learn them,” he says. “I started enjoying chess more when I got more used to its rules and positions.”

The movement of the chess pieces and the ways that both players are on even ground and it takes intellectual prowess, rather than luck, to triumph are the things Niklas most enjoys about chess. These days, he plays chess casually, but he used to travel to tournaments when he was younger. He agrees that the chess world is tolerant.

“Chess communities are a place for people that take chess as an interest and are welcome for any newcomers,” he says. “Your skill in chess should depend on your own experience and knowledge. Even if a specific autistic person’s learnability is different from someone else, a person who plays chess is beneficial for what works best for them for their playstyle.”

Niklas recommends that anyone who is interested in or curious about chess give it a try. Whether they will enjoy it, like so many things, depends on the person. 

van Delft, Karel and van Delft, Merijn, Developing Chess Talent: Creating a chess culture by coaching, training, organization and communication. E-book available for download from the author’s website, chesstalent.com, or email karel@kvdc.nl to purchase a hard copy.