

BOOK REVIEW

Chess is Child's Play: Teaching Techniques that Work

*Reviewed by William Bart, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, MN, USA*

*Chess is Child's Play: Teaching Techniques
That Work*

Laura Sherman and Bill Kilpatrick

© 2012 by Mongoose Press

300 pp.

\$19.95

ISBN: 978-1-936277-31-5

Chess is Child's Play (CICP) provides instructional guidance on how to chess. It is written primarily for parents, although any teacher of beginners or novice players of chess would benefit from this book. Both authors, Liz Sherman and Bill Kilpatrick, are veteran teachers of chess and they draw on their years of experiences teaching chess to young people to identify activities intended to promote the learning of chess.

The first chapter provides the case for learning chess. The authors contend that chess instruction provides the following ten outcomes: (1) improves problem-solving skills among children; (2) helps children plan for unanticipated events; (3) improves the ability to think ahead among children; (4) bolsters child self-confidence; (5) teaches children to think flexibly (i.e., outside of the box); (6) teaches children how to win and lose with grace; (7) gives children the ability to be creative by gen-

erating alternative chess positions; (8) promotes the capacity to concentrate for extended periods of time; (9) fosters a sense of teamwork within children as chess players learn how to manage groups of chess pieces; and (10) promotes the capacity to handle difficult problems.

The second chapter lists what readers of the book can expect from the lessons in the book. The third chapter provides an explication of teaching tips for chess educators. Among the tips are the following: (1) provide regular lessons, with a few per week; and (2) make the lessons brief and fun. The following 23 chapters of the book provide specific chess lessons for beginners. Among the chapters are lessons on (1) how to move the basic six chess pieces legally; (2) how to castle, (3) how to attack the pieces and positions of opposing players, and (4) how to defend one's own pieces.

There are numerous strengths to this book. First of all, the authors know what they are discussing. Laura Sherman played tournament chess in Los Angeles. She established the chess-related firm, Your Chess Coach, in Florida. She has much experience teaching chess to children. Bill Kilpatrick also played tournament chess, winning both the Florida State and the Southeastern U.S. Chess Championships. He also has been an active chess trainer of children.

This book reflects their years of teaching chess to children.

In addition to the competency of the authors, *CICP* is a sprightly read sprinkled with short easy-to-read paragraphs amidst special sections with names such as “Coach’s Corner” and “Coffee Talk”. The “Coach’s Corner” sections provide tips and information that is intended to help chess coaches in their teaching of chess to children. The “Coffee Talk” sections present observations of the authors from their chess training activities. In the “Coffee Talk” sections, the authors cite experiences of their students that provide anecdotal evidence that chess has positive educational and/or psychological effects.

One distinctive feature of the book is that each chapter has strengths along with weaknesses. For example, chapter 1 indicates reasons for playing chess. The reasons such as “chess gives children the ability to think ahead” are quite reasonable; however, the evidence supporting the reasons is not documented. The reader is left uncertain as to how credible is the evidence underlying the assertions made in the chapter.

Chapter 2 provides a clear exposition of the design and composition of the book. That chapter contributes to reader understanding of what to expect as the reader reads the book. This chapter is one of the most worthwhile chapters in the book.

Chapter 3 also has many more strengths than weaknesses. That chapter provides fine tips for teaching chess to children such as the following: (1) “stick to regular lessons, several times a week”; (2) “keep the lessons short and fun”; (3) “use real-life examples”; (4) “use very simple words”; (5) “praise them often for a job well-done”; (6) “teaching children together”; and (7) “use the board and pieces, not the book”. The tips offered in chapter 3 have substantial practical merit. This chapter is arguably the most useful chapter in the book.

Chapter 4 provides exercises for two- to four-year old children. It may seem extraordinary to many people that one could teach the complex game of chess, but it is possible – at

least some basic elements of chess. This chapter provides exercises that teach children how to identify chess pieces and types of squares in the chessboard.

Chapters 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, and 14 provide instruction on attributes of the rook, the bishop, the queen, the king, the knight, and the pawn respectively. That order of the chapters on pieces is quite reasonable, because it mirrors the order of difficulty of the pieces. The rook is the easiest piece to master; whereas, the pawn is the most difficult primarily because of the *en passant* option. Interspersed among those chapters are chapters on capturing opposing pieces (Chapter 6), attacking and defending pieces (Chapter 8), how to check (Chapter 11), and how to checkmate (Chapter 12).

Chapter 15 provides instruction on what are legal and illegal moves. Chapter 16 provides instruction on how to place pieces on the chessboard for the start of a chess game. Chapter 17 provides instruction on how to castle. These chapters cover content that must be mastered in order for even a novice to play a game of chess in accordance with the rules of chess.

The subsequent chapters in the book provide more advanced instruction on chess. Chapter 19 provides instruction on basic chess strategy for novice players. Chapter 20 provides information on the relative values of chess pieces but primarily in relation to chess situations. One drawback to this chapter is that the widely held point system for chess pieces is not highlighted. Elements of that point system are scattered throughout the chapter.

Chapter 21 is entitled “Your Pieces Can Get in the Way.” This is an important chapter in the book, because it provided instruction on how to perceive not only on which square a piece is located, but also to which squares a piece can move. What is unfortunate is that the authors feature the range of possible squares for the king rather than the range of possible squares for the other pieces for a given game position. Chapter 22 provides modest instruction on the topic of attacking a piece.

Chapter 23 is an excellent chapter in the book, because it addresses the four major topics

that any player must consider when defending a piece – i.e., move away, block, support, and take. A fine quiz in the chapter involves asking a child the four methods to protect a given piece in a given chess position. Chapter 24 makes use of the instruction in the prior chapter in a presentation of ideas involving getting out of check.

Chapter 25 provides instruction on checkmate. This chapter provides some fine problems for students on how to checkmate an opponent. Chapter 26 provides instruction on stalemate and draw. Young chess players often have difficulty distinguishing among a check, checkmate, stalemate, and draw. This chapter provides modest instruction to assist children to distinguish among those four chess conditions.

Among the strengths of the book are the myriad of exercises and solutions presented to teach and assess chess knowledge, techniques, and rules to beginners, the “troubleshooting tips” presented at the end of the many chapters to offer guidance to readers to address learning problems among the students, and the relatively reasonable order of the chapters from simplest to most advanced. Among the weaknesses of the book are the lack of discussion of relevant research literature that supports the recommendations cited in the book and the lack of chess material that would be useful to intermediate and advanced chess players unless they were teaching chess. The authors do state the following in the preface: “The book is designed to help chess masters and novices alike. So, if you are an excellent chess player, this book is for you, too!” Intermediate and advanced chess players would likely already know the chess concepts presented in the book, but not necessarily know how to teach the concepts to beginners.

This book, even with its shortcomings, would be a fine addition to the book library used by chess instructors of children everywhere. This book also provides the bases for interesting and worthwhile lines of inquiry in which researchers could test the utility of the exercises and tips that the authors provide throughout the book. Do those exercises and tips actually help students master specific chess concepts and, if so, to what extent?

Unfortunately, there is a relative dearth of empirical research on how children learn chess and how to teach the game of chess. One source that provides a fine critical review of the limited empirical research base on the learning of chess among students is the scholarly work by Gobet, de Voogt, and Retschitzki (2004). Bart (2012) wrote a review of that fine book in a prior issue of this journal.

Presently there are no research articles published in refereed academic journals that validate the interventions suggested in *CICP*. However, *CICP* provides a welcome stimulus for empirical research on how to learn chess and on how to teach chess. In summary, *CICP* would be useful to many present and future teachers of chess to children, especially as the movement for chess in the schools expands worldwide.

REFERENCES

- Bart, W. (2012). Review of the book *Moves in mind: The psychology of board games*. *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, 4(3), 92–94. doi:10.4018/jgcms.2012070107.
- Gobet, F., de Voogt, A., & Retschitzki, J. (2004). *Moves in mind: The psychology of board games*. New York, NY: Psychology Press..

William Bart received his Ph.D. Degree from the University of Chicago. He is a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association. He was also awarded the Fellow Status from the Division of Educational Psychology from the American Psychological Association. His interests are in learning, cognition, and measurement. He has several publications dealing with the psychology of chess.