FOURTEEN FALLACIES ABOUT JUNIOR CHESS
Richard James

1. England leads the world in Junior Chess

A generation ago, England really did come pretty close to leading the world in junior chess, but now things are very different. In the past we would have had potential medallists in many age groups in the World and European Youth Championships while today we get excited if someone scores 50%. Of course we still have a few outstanding young players, and it's good that there is talk of providing better facilities for them, but it's more in terms of strength in depth that we are lagging further and further behind other Western European countries, not to mention Eastern Europe and Asia. The current FIDE list has 19 active English players born in 1995 (two of whom are based in France) and 258 active Spanish players of the same age. The 2012 French Junior Championships have 593 boys and 426 girls playing in 7 age groups (roughly U21 down to U8, to link up with the FIDE youth/junior events), all of whom have qualified through a network of regional leagues and chess clubs within leagues, along with another 211 players in two open sections.

I believe, from nearly 40 years' experience teaching chess that one of the problems starts right at the beginning: that the experience young children get in primary school chess clubs, or, in many cases, the way they've been taught the moves at home before joining their primary school chess club, leads to low standards of play and only gives them a short-term interest in chess. It became clear to me 15 years or so ago that the way we were teaching, organising and promoting chess for young children was misguided, and, for this reason, I eventually felt obliged to give up most of my junior chess commitments and start searching for an answer. At first I thought that we were simply starting children too young but looking at the way chess was taught in other countries and an e-mail conversation three years ago with Cor van Wijgerden, the co-author of the Dutch Steps Method convinced me that it wasn't quite as simple as that: if you start children young you need to go about teaching them in a different way. But before we can make any real process we have to acknowledge that there's a problem.

I would put it to you that one of the major reasons for our decline is that some other countries are using structured teaching methods for young beginners rather than the ad hoc methods, if you can call them that, that we seem to encourage here. I don't have much knowledge of the methods used in France and Spain, and would be very interested to hear from anyone with experience of junior chess in these countries.

Proposition 1: England is way behind much of the world in junior chess, specifically in terms of strength in depth. We need to look at what's happening in other, culturally similar, countries in Western Europe, and see how we can learn from them.

2. All children should learn chess

Yes – in an ideal world every child 'should' learn chess. But every child 'should' also learn Bridge, Scrabble, Mancala, Go, Backgammon and many other board and card

games. Every child ‘should’ also participate in a wide range of individual and team, outdoor and indoor sports. Every child ‘should’ also be able to learn at least two musical instruments from different families, and learn about a wide range of musical genres. Every child ‘should’ also sing in a choir. Every child ‘should’ also be able to experiment with a wide variety of arts and crafts using a wide range of media. Every child ‘should’ also learn to speak several foreign languages. Every child ‘should’ join a youth organisation such as, depending on parental taste, the Scouts or Guides, a Cadet Corps or the Woodcraft Folk. Every child ‘should’ learn how to cook. Every child ‘should’ take up gardening. Every child ‘should’ study philosophy. Every child ‘should’ take up meditation. Every child ‘should’ learn how to program a computer and design a website. Every child ‘should’ do a thousand and one other interesting, enjoyable and beneficial things. Each one of these activities has enthusiasts who are trying to persuade parents and schools that children ‘should’ share their particular interest. At the same time children – not ‘should’ but ‘must’ – have a basic education in terms of reading, writing, mathematics, sciences and humanities which will enable them to make sense of the world, continue to further, more specialised, education should they wish to do so, and find a job. At the same time many experts are increasingly concerned that children are doing too much too soon and don’t have enough time just to enjoy being themselves.

Wearing my ‘chess’ hat it’s very easy for me to visit schools and tell them all children should do chess. But wearing my ‘teacher’ hat, and as a teacher who believes in small-scale, child-centred education, I can see that, for many of the children at the school where I teach, chess may not be the best use of their time.

If we take the activities mentioned above and rank them in order of the number of children who would gain significant benefit from them, much as I love chess I wouldn’t put it at the top. (I wouldn’t put it at the bottom either, but that’s not my point.)

Here’s GM Jaan Ehlvest, writing in the introduction to his new chess course based on the step by step methods used in Russia for many years:

“This book is especially for those children who, for whatever reason, find chess more interesting than karate, music etc.”

As it’s a book for absolute beginners I suppose teachers or parents are expected to be proactive in deciding which children should try chess.

David Malam is a strong (200+) chess player and the head of Twickenham Preparatory School, one of the strongest chess schools in the country. He is very enthusiastic about using strategy games on the school curriculum but concedes that some children will gain more from simpler games such as Connect 4, or from team rather than individual games than from chess.

So instead of saying that ‘all children should learn chess’, let’s say that ‘all children should have the opportunity to learn chess’. And let’s send out the message about the sort of children who are most likely to enjoy and benefit from chess (academically able, particularly at maths perhaps, competitive, often introverted, can focus intently one one thing, prefer individual to team activities, prefer quiet to loud activities) and

encourage parents and schools to be proactive about which children should learn chess. One possible idea for primary schools is to use chess as a curriculum enhancement option for gifted and talented maths students, but many other approaches are also possible.

Proposition 2: All children should have the opportunity to learn chess

3. All schools should do chess

Again, many of the same arguments apply. There's a whole host of extra-curricular activities that schools could offer and usually they have to make a choice. We might want to give as many schools as possible the option of chess but we have to realise and accept that many schools are, not always for sensible reasons, opposed to chess. If a school such as Twickenham Prep has a senior member of staff who is keen on chess it might well want to encourage children to play on a daily basis, which is of course absolutely fine. But you can't really force schools who are not interested to do chess.

For these reasons, any attempt to promote chess as a compulsory subject in schools in the UK is doomed to failure. There are better ways for us to promote junior chess than to waste our time on something that will never happen. In Armenia, yes, because it's part of their national culture. But here it's not, and almost certainly never will be.

Before we go any further we have to ask ourselves what exactly we mean by 'do chess' anyway. There are three products that schools can offer: teaching chess to beginners, providing opportunities for children who have learnt the moves to play casual games with their friends and providing tuition for children who are interested in trying out serious competitive chess. Just deciding you want to 'do' chess and starting a club will attract children with all three requirements and you'll probably end up not doing any of them optimally. It would be entirely sensible and logical for a school to choose any combination of these three, or none. But if we're going to go into schools we need to explain the possibilities to them, give them different options, and, for the first and third, offer them an outstanding product, as well as, where necessary, an outstanding teacher. While we have some outstanding teachers (and others who are not outstanding) we don't have an outstanding product. In fact we don't really have a product at all.

Compare chess with swimming. You might want to teach young children how to swim, to provide facilities for children to have fun splashing around in the shallow end, and provide coaching for competitive swimmers. But you'd need different people for each purpose: someone used to working with young children to teach the beginners, a life guard to supervise the children having fun in the shallow end and a proper swimming coach for the competitive swimmers. And you wouldn't do them all at the same time because they'd just get in each other's way.

My basic problem with teaching in primary school chess clubs comes down to this: most of the children in these clubs are only interested in playing casual games with their friends and have no interest in learning or improving their chess. There's no reason why they shouldn't do just as there's no reason why they shouldn't kick a ball around in the playground or splash around in the shallow end of the pool. We need to

identify those who do want to take chess seriously, and whose parents are prepared to support this, and provide the tuition they need within a different environment.

Proposition 3: Schools should think very carefully about what they want out of chess

4. We should be encouraging chess in schools

Right, so we've decided that we want to give every child the opportunity to learn chess. If we're realistic we're also aware that not every school will want to teach children chess, and that forcing schools to do this will not work. So what do we do?

Fortunately, there's an answer which is, at least in principle, simple. We set up a network of Junior Chess Clubs, or Schools, or Academies, or Centres of Excellence or whatever you want to call them. These clubs (or whatever) would be professionally run and provide outreach to the local schools and community. The staff would include teachers who were not necessarily strong players but who were knowledgeable about how to teach chess to young children, as well as strong players for higher level coaching. 3Cs in Oldham run something very similar to this at the moment. Richmond used to, but, for various reasons, no longer does. We're working on it, though.

So if a school in that area wanted to do chess the Club would be able to advise them on their options, provide or recommend appropriate coaching materials and lesson plans, and, if required, provide a chess teacher. They would also run beginners' groups for children who were not able to learn at school as well as groups for more experienced players who wanted to learn how to play at a competitive level. Schools who just wanted to provide facilities for casual games wouldn't need a professional coach, just an enthusiastic teacher or parent who knew the rules, and could feed through those children who wanted to take chess more seriously.

In other countries in Western Europe things are easier. A chess club will often be a large organisation meeting at weekends where chess is by no means the only activity. Such a club would often have an active junior section offering tuition at all levels in the same way that football, rugby and cricket clubs operate here. But our chess clubs tend to be small and insular, meeting in draughty church halls or dubious pubs, run by middle-aged men with little interest in the outside world. Until this situation changes, and I really don't see it happening, we need to promote junior clubs instead (which could well be connected to the local adult club).

There are many reasons (and I write from experience) why junior chess clubs are much better than schools at producing children with a lifelong interest in chess. They also, at a lower level, can provide a means whereby every child has the opportunity to play chess.

I would propose that the main focus of junior chess development in this country should be through setting up a network of junior chess clubs, not directly through promoting chess in schools.

Don't get me wrong, though. I have no problem with schools which are really committed to chess and where children get the chance to play on a regular basis, as

long as there's a junior club to attract their strongest players. About 20 years ago there were two primary schools in Richmond where the headteacher was very keen on chess and all children were taught to play. One of the schools produced a GM and the other produced two IMs. Children who just play chess once a week at school, though, will make little progress and soon lose interest.

Proposition 4: We should set up a network of junior chess clubs providing outreach to schools

5. Chess makes children smarter

There are a number of studies in the public domain which claim that 'chess is good for you', and these are often used as a means of justifying chess in schools. But, quite apart from the dubious methodology of many of these studies (I don't know of any genuine 'double blind' chess studies in which neither the children nor the teachers were aware that they were part of the study) they claim to demonstrate the benefits of learning and studying chess, not specifically of playing chess. Nor do I know of any studies which followed up the students after a few years to discover whether the academic benefits were temporary or permanent, or considered whether the improvement was caused by the teacher or the subject. Nor do I know of any studies that compared chess with other games or activities in terms of academic benefit.

Anecdotal evidence from Twickenham Prep suggests that strategy games, generally, are beneficial, but that chess is not the best choice for everyone. So perhaps schools who want to use chess to make children smarter should instead consider using a wider range of strategy games rather than just chess.

If you stop and think about it, it makes no sense to start a chess club for children who have been taught to play in a non-methodological way because a study claimed that children who have been taught chess methodologically showed academic improvement. The Kasparov Chess Foundation claims that "if taught correctly, chess can be a student's driving force, helping him/her in every aspect of critical thinking development". Note the words 'if taught correctly'. Most children in the UK learn the moves in half an hour or so from a family member or friend. The people who run the Steps Method, for instance, would, I suspect, claim that this is not the correct way to teach chess.

In spite of my reservations about the studies, I suspect that, in some cases, teaching chess in a step by step way can be academically beneficial but it's not what we're doing here in the UK at the moment. I would also guess that you'd see more academic improvement in deprived areas than you would in affluent areas where many children are already academically successful, but it is probably in the more affluent areas where you will find more children who are potentially strong players. So before you decide on your chess policy you have to think about what exactly you're trying to achieve.

I've suspected for a long time that these studies are actually counter-productive in that they give the wrong idea about chess and encourage schools and parents to teach their children chess for the wrong reasons. In an affluent, predominately middle-class area

such as Richmond, parents are increasingly obsessed with their children's academic success. They will sign their children up for the school chess club because they think they'll gain a few IQ points which might help them pass the entrance exams for the secondary school of their choice, but won't want to do any more than this because the time spent on chess might hamper their chances of academic success. When they've got all they can from the game they'll withdraw their children from the chess club.

One other thing: a lot is said about the perceived academic benefits of chess. There are also considerable social benefits as well. We should be promoting the social as well as the academic benefits when trying to sell chess to parents and teachers. And, perhaps more than that, we should be promoting chess as a fantastic game for older children and adults, but one at which younger children can, in certain circumstances, excel. I really don't think it's a good idea to draw absurd conclusions from dubious studies as a way of promoting chess in schools – if indeed that's what we should be doing. And, as I spent 15 years working for an organisation promoting chess in schools in that way, I've been there and done that.

Proposition 5: Learning chess in a methodological way may in some circumstances have a beneficial effect on some children

6. Chess is a fun game for young children

Well yes, up to a point chess is a fun game for young children. I have no objection at all to children having fun playing games – indeed it's an integral part of growing up. There are several reasons why I think chess is not the best game to be used for that purpose, and why it is not the best way to use chess, but it's where we are at the moment, so, to some extent, we're stuck with it.

Firstly, chess is just too hard for children below the age of about 7. Children, unless they've been taught correctly, will spend time arguing over the rules and any legal moves they play will be pretty random. They will gain more benefit, and probably more enjoyment as well, by playing simpler games which are easier to understand and easier to play well. Fortunately, there are lots of simpler games you can play with just some of the chess pieces which will be at least as much fun for children as 'big chess' as well as giving them skills which they will be able to use when they are ready to play the full game. One of the problems we have with school chess clubs at the moment is that because children know, or think they know, all the moves, they're reluctant to play games with just some of the pieces. What seems to happen in the Netherlands is that learning the moves is the responsibility of the chess club, not of the parents. Or, if you prefer, we can provide parents with instructions on how to teach their children and only let them into the club when they are good enough.

Children can also use such games as Noughts and Crosses as preparation for chess. The principle is the same: it's a two-person zero-sum game which you win if your opponent overlooks your threat or if you make a move which creates two threats at once; which is essentially what chess is, at a very much higher level, as well. Indeed, you could (and I would) argue that there's not much point in doing too much chess unless you can play Noughts and Crosses well.

The other point is that if you promote chess as a fun game for young children it will automatically make it less attractive for older children, who will see it as 'uncool' and demeaning to play a young children's game.

As anyone who plays competitively knows, chess is, or can be, a very difficult and demanding game for intelligent people who like a mental challenge. The children who just play fun chess at a low level are the ones who, you can be absolutely sure, will quickly get bored and will not take a long-term interest in the game. If you are, or have been, a serious competitive chess player, you might well think, as I do, that it's rather insulting to suggest that the game to which we devote so much time and which, at least in my case, we play rather badly, is so trivial as to be suitable for 7-year-olds, or even for 5-year-olds.

Proposition 6: Chess is a game at which some young children, in specific circumstances, can excel - but there are many fun games children can play with (or without) chess pieces

7. The more children who learn chess the better

Why? If my first mantra is that every child should have the opportunity to learn chess my second is that every child who wants to learn chess should be taught in the best possible way.

When I asked Cor van Wijgerden, the co-author of the Dutch Steps Method, what he thought of the UK Chess Challenge he replied: "I don't want to teach 70,000 children to learn to play chess, as Mike Basman apparently does (or I must have 7,000 trainers available) and lose almost all of them (although … the turnover of the first step will rise!) I want to teach 1,000 children and I would like that at least 100 will have a fantastic hobby for the rest of their life. I know that I must raise their playing strength to a certain level otherwise they will quit. So that start must be perfect. Skill developing from the beginning (playing games as in the first 6 lessons of Step 1). Not starting with whole games because chess is too difficult."

Well, I guess it depends on what you want out of chess. If you just want as many children as possible to have fun playing chess and you're prepared to sacrifice it as an adult activity then by all means go ahead and teach 70,000 children badly. But if you're looking to increase the number of serious teenage and adult players, then you should, in the first instance, aim to teach fewer children well rather than more children badly.

What do we mean by teaching children well? According to international experts in early years chess it means starting from first principles, going very slowly, teaching in small groups (4-12 children), following a highly structured and methodical course. What it certainly doesn't mean is Dad teaching little Johnny the moves in ten minutes so that he can join the school chess club next week and play in the UK Chess Challenge. The implication of Cor van Wijgerden's answer is that schools and clubs should be teaching absolute beginners, rather than just assuming children can already play. It's also interesting that, although the Steps method is used in both schools and clubs, he refers to clubs rather than schools.

We need to put across a clear message about what chess is, and, perhaps more importantly, what it isn't, and, as I wrote earlier, to be proactive in identifying children who are mostly likely to benefit from chess. Once we have a system that works we can then go about training more teachers and teaching more children well.

Proposition 7: It's better to teach a few children well than a lot of children badly

8. The younger you start chess the better

Ah! This is not just one of the big fallacies in chess education but one of the big fallacies in education generally. Many years ago, Elo published some figures demonstrating that children who learnt the moves at 10 became stronger players than those who learnt at 14. Well, there might be a number of reasons for this, but it doesn't follow that children who learn the moves at 6 will become stronger players than those who learn the moves at 10.

If you decide you want to fast track your children, by all means start them young. Ideally, our network of junior chess clubs will provide support for you. If you're the head of a school and you want your school to be very good at chess you might want to do the same thing, and that is absolutely fine. This is not a route, though, that many parents or schools would choose to take. But for children who are only going to play once or twice a week there's no reason at all to start them too young.

One of the problems is that young children enjoy board games much more than older children do, and the chess pieces are something they find particularly attractive. Although they can learn the moves easily they will find it hard to make progress, become frustrated and give up.

Many people believe that Finland has the best education system in the world, but there they do not start formal education until the age of 7. But they soon catch up and overtake countries like the UK where we do things younger and younger. The room in which I am typing this is also used for listening to young children reading. Some children are keen to do this but sometimes others are not in the mood and have to be cajoled into participating. Why?, I ask myself. There's no hurry. If you start something a year after you are ready it doesn't really matter, but if you start something a year before you are ready you could well be put off for life. Even Magnus Carlsen, who comes from a chess playing family, started at 5, didn't really understand it and only returned to the game a couple of years later. Levon Aronian, currently ranked second behind Carlsen, learnt the moves from his sister at the age of 9.

It may well be true that the younger a child starts chess the more likely (s)he is to become a grandmaster, but it's also true, in my experience, that the later a child starts competitive chess the more likely (s)he is to continue playing as a teenager and an adult. While we should certainly provide as much support as we can for parents who are fast tracking their children, we have to ask ourselves whether it's in the best interests of the chess community to promote mass participation in competitive chess for young children who barely know the moves.

If we want lots of young children to learn chess that's fine – but it should be done using a structured, step by step course rather than by just promoting school chess clubs for children who have learnt the moves at home.

Proposition 8: If you start children too soon or don't teach them correctly they will give up after a year or so: the later children start competitive chess the more likely they are to continue playing as adults

9. We should employ professional chess players to teach young children

Well, if you wanted a primary school maths teacher would you choose an Oxford professor or a trained teacher who understand how young children learn?

Something that concerns me is that one reason we seem to be promoting chess in schools is to provide employment for semi-professional chess players. But those who run structured courses in other countries will tell you that the best teachers for beginners are often not chess experts but gifted teachers who know little more than the basics themselves. I've met a number of children who haven't enjoyed chess at their previous school because the lessons were too advanced for them or because they were expected to do things like writing their moves down before they were ready. I'm sure I've put off a lot of children myself, as well. If you instead set up a network of junior chess clubs this will provide more enjoyable, and possibly more lucrative work for semi-professional coaches who will be dealing mostly with children who are stronger and more interested in learning.

The Steps Method advises that you should spend a year over the first stage of the course (teaching the moves and how not to leave pieces en prise) – some teachers get through it in three months but it's best not to do this: the longer you take, within reason, the better.

Spending time in a school talking to teachers and children has made me realise that there's much more to teaching than standing in front of a class talking. You need to structure not just a lesson but a course. You're constantly repeating and reinforcing to make sure everyone has understood, and checking again at the start of the next lesson. You're providing more advanced material for children who are finding the work easy while looking at how to help those who are finding it hard. Being good at standing in front of the class with a demo board is only a small part of teaching chess. The children may well enjoy your lessons but unless they've actually learnt something there's not much point. And of course you can't realistically do any of this within a chess club with 30-40 children of various levels. This is why teaching beginners has to be a separate activity, and why beginners should not be admitted to clubs where competitive chess is played.

If you're following a structured course, though, it doesn't matter whether you know little more than your pupils or whether you're a grandmaster. If you have the enthusiasm, the rapport with children and the ability to teach you'll be successful.

Proposition 9: The earlier children start the more important it is that the teachers understand child development as it applies to chess – the best teachers for young children are often schoolteachers or parents armed with a manual

10. We should teach the moves in a couple of weeks so that they can play complete games

This is what usually happens here: we encourage as many children as possible to take part in the UK Chess Challenge and other events even though some of them hardly know the moves. Elsewhere, though, the recommendations are very different.

Look, for example, at the Steps Method. The first step, which, you will remember, should take at least a year, longer for younger children, only introduces checkmate half way through. From the introduction: "Learning how to mate is postponed as long as possible. This sounds astonishing and even incredible but up till now, practice has shown that this effect works perfectly." And, paraphrased from their website, in answer to the question about how long teachers should spend over Step 1:

"As long as possible. The ability to solve the exercises and obtain the certificate does not always correspond to the student's playing skills. Only then when the student can use the material in his games regularly, should the following step be introduced. It is no use to teach Step 2 to children who fail to capture their opponent's unprotected pieces in their own games. In the Step 1 Manual you can read the following: The basic material seems to be simple and some trainers manage to complete step 1 within 3 months. That is not the best approach. Essential chess skills such as giving mate require a long learning period. It is better to devote at least a year to the first step to master the basic skills very well (there are always exceptions). The lost time can be easily recovered later."

GM Jaan Ehlvest's recently published Chess Gymnasium takes this even further, only introducing checkmate in lesson 21 of a 28 lesson book. From the introduction:

"This manual differs from other beginning chess books available in the United States. This is the 'Russian way' of teaching Chess to young children. It is not an arbitrary method but the result of decades of research. 'Chess Gymnasium' introduces each concept slowly, but with depth. We do not attempt to have students play legal games against each other as soon as possible, but rather to use the very process of learning the rules as a teaching tool. This is important, and what makes this manual different from others. For this reason, two lessons are devoted to each piece. Besides simply learning how each piece moves, the students solve various problems with each piece before they have learned all the rules of chess. Along the way, particularly close attention is given to the geometry of the chess board itself.

"The ultimate goal of chess – checkmate - is not introduced until Lesson 21! After learning the material in this book, students will know all of the rules. However, we can say that they will gain much more, and have a much more solid foundation in chess, than if they had been taught the rules as quickly as possible without discretion. This book is designed to be used by any adult who wishes to teach chess to a child. You do not need to know anything about chess! Thus it can be used by a master who

is teaching chess in a classroom, or by a classroom teacher who knows no more about chess than the children. It can also be used by parents who wish to teach their children chess at home."

Compare this with what happens here: a school sets up a chess club so Dad, perhaps having read somewhere that Chess Is Good For You, teaches little Johnny how the pieces move and plays a couple of games with him so that he can join the club next week, just in time to take part in the first round of the UK Chess Challenge. He'll be delighted to get his badge in 3 weeks time but it's really not going to help him become a good player or develop a lasting interest in chess.

One reason why this happens is that we have top down coaching within a bottom up administration rather than bottom up coaching in a top down administration. So strong players start teaching chess or running tournaments without really knowing anything about child development or how to teach young children. They encourage as many children as possible to take part because they make more money that way. And, by and large, they're only really interested at the players right at the top.

Proposition 10: We should spend 6 to 12 months, depending on the age of the child,, teaching the other pieces along with board vision and control, and attack, defence and safety, before we introduce the king, along with concepts of check, checkmate and stalemate, and then another 6 to 12 months working on these ideas before children start playing competitive chess.

11. After teaching the moves we teach tactics, endings and openings

Take your typical chess book for children. It teaches you the moves pretty quickly, followed by check, checkmate and stalemate. Then you learn, in some order, some opening principles, some simple tactics and some endings. The first version of chessKIDS did very much the same thing, but it became clear from working with some of my school pupils that there was a gap of a couple of years between being able to learn the rules and being able to do even the simplest two move tactic.

Again, if you read the Steps and Gymnasium courses all this makes sense. At first it seems crazy to spend a year or more teaching what children can pick up in half an hour or so. But then you understand that they're not just learning the moves: they're developing chessboard vision and learning about different methods of attack and defence. As they say, there's no point in teaching anything else to students who fail to take their opponent's unprotected pieces. If this method can really teach children not to leave pieces en prise within a year or so it's pretty remarkable. But until you're at that level there's not a lot of point in trying to show someone a combination that wins a pawn. The main thing kids need to learn after learning the moves is quite simply how to avoid one move oversights – and, before that, to understand that you can – and should – avoid one move oversights. But most chess writers and publishers don't understand this and think that they can write a book for less experienced adult players, put some cartoons in it, and claim it's suitable for children.

Proposition 11: After teaching the moves we teach children how to avoid one-move oversights through exercises teaching board vision and control, attack, defence and safety.

12. We should put children into tournaments as quickly as possible

I really don't see the point of putting children into even low-level tournaments when they hardly know how the pieces move. We're fooling the children, along with their parents and teachers, into thinking they're real chess players when in fact they're no such thing. Giving children all the accoutrements of real chess such as clocks, scoresheets and grades when they are more or less playing random moves really does them no favours. Children find the baubles and trinkets they win in the UK Chess Challenge attractive but the superficiality of bogus rewards of this nature is well documented. They go to the chess club because they want to win the prizes, not because they want to play chess, and as they get older and the attraction wears off they drop out of chess. If we want to give prizes of this nature (and that's open to debate) we should do so for demonstrating improved skills rather than just for winning games. There's another thing as well: in many countries there is concern about putting children into competitions too soon, not so much because they're not good enough players, but more because they lack the emotional maturity to cope with the pressures of playing competitive chess. Some young children can deal with this, but others cannot.

Proposition 12: we should only put children into tournaments when they have reached an appropriate level, and when they have sufficient emotional maturity to deal with victory and defeat

13. Children give up chess when they leave Primary School because there's no chess at their Secondary School

A few do, yes, but most give up long before them. Typically, a Primary School chess club might have 16 children in Y3, 8 in Y4, 4 in Y5 and 2 in Y6. Inevitably there will be a high drop-out rate: chidren will try a lot of activities when they're young, and only choose to continue those they like best, but we need to ensure that the drop-out rate is as low as possible.

Here's Cor van Wijgerden, in an email to me: "Lacking a proper board vision and not applying things they have learnt are, in my view, the main reasons why children drop out". From my experience and observation I'm sure he's right. If children are just playing chess and getting no instruction they will not develop board vision and continue to leave pieces en prise, and not to take the pieces their opponents leave en prise. If they're getting instruction from strong players they will be taught things that are too advanced for them, and there will be no reinforcement or checks to see that they've really understood what they've learnt. (I spent years doing exactly this myself before giving up because it clearly didn't work.) Remember that the Steps Method recommends that children spend a year or two teaching children not to leave pieces en prise and ensuring that they don't do this in their games before moving on to anything

else, teaching in small groups so this is possible. Here, we either teach nothing or too much too soon.

In most secondary schools there's little or no chess. Thee exceptions are almost all large selective schools, usually boys' schools, and always have an enthusiastic member of staff who is actively promoting the game. In some areas there's little opportunity for younger players to play and learn, but even where the opportunity exists, most children give up after a year or two because they fail to make significant progress.

Proposition 13: Most children give up chess long before they leave primary school because they are not taught the basics correctly so fail to make progress.

14. Promoting Primary School chess clubs will produce a lot of strong players.

No it won't – at least not the way we're doing it at the moment. If anything, it will have the opposite effect. Thirty years or so ago there were a few primary schools where the Headteacher or a senior member of staff was genuinely interested in chess, taught all the children to play and provided opportunities to play every day. There were two such schools in my area: one produced a GM and the other produced two IMs. This still occasionally happens, but almost always in the private sector.

In most Primary Schools where chess is 'done' there's a club which meets for half an hour one lunchtime or an hour one afternoon, and children get no other opportunity to play. There's no way children in this sort of environment will ever get anywhere unless they're doing significant work on chess at home as well. Parental support is absolutely essential for young children to become good players, and the younger they start the more support they need.

If you want to produce strong young players you need to set up junior chess clubs rather than encourage chess in primary schools. Parents need much more commitment to take their children to a club than to pick them up an hour late from school. Clubs will have higher standards of play, attracting children from a wider area, and will be able to meet longer hours and perhaps more often.

There's also some evidence from Cor van Wijgerden that running a proper course within a school or a club encourages more parental interest: "The most common order: Manual and Extra and Plus books (supplementary material – RJ) from a mother! Her child has got Step 1 and she is interested as well."

Proposition 14: Promoting Junior Chess Clubs will produce more strong players. Promoting chess in Primary Schools, unless is it taught correctly, will produce weak players with only a short-term interest in the game.

The Way Forward

If I had an unlimited supply of money to spend on chess I would set up a national network of junior chess clubs, along with a national chess curriculum with written tests. Teachers would be licensed to teach at different levels and tournaments would be licensed as being suitable for children who have passed the tests at different levels. While I take on board Cor van Wijgerden's point that there's a big difference between what children can do in theory (taking a test) and in practice (in their games) most young people are used to the concept of different levels from activities such as Martial Arts so will take to the idea of developing their skills in order to reach the next level. Using this system you can ensure that children will not be put off by entering events for which they are not yet ready, or waste their time by playing in tournaments that are too easy for them.

The course would comprise 3 levels, each with 2 sub-levels. Each sub-level will take about 6 months to complete, longer for younger children. At the end of each sub-level, children will take a written test which they need to pass to move onto the next level. A sample test in written and interactive formats will be available online.

Level 1 (pre-competitive): Beginners' groups. Could be taught on the curriculum or run as an after-school club (taught by a teacher or parent: knowledge of how children learn is more important than chess knowledge). Small groups (4-12 children) are best. Ideal length for club: 1 hour, possibly shorter for very young children (up to Y2). Junior Chess Clubs could also run groups at this level. Alternatively, parents can be encouraged to teach children at home. Level 1 players should not be playing competitive chess.

On successful completion of the end of level test children will be eligible to join a Level 2 club.

Level 2 club (Grade 0-50): for example a typical primary school club but with qualification required to join. Could also be run as a community club serving several schools within the same area. This would also be the lower section in a Junior Chess Club Session length: 1-2 hours (lunchtime would probably be too short). Typically, a school club will run for an hour and be rather less serious: a junior chess club may run for 2 hours and be more serious, introducing clocks and notation. Children will be encouraged to play low-level competitive chess, for example UKCC, internal school championship, house matches, inter-form matches, matches against other local schools. Teachers should be reasonably knowledgeable about chess (say 75+ ECF) – A Junior Chess Club would be able to provide advice and recommend teachers for clubs at this level, although many schools would be happy to run a club at this level mainly for casual games between friends, in which case they would not need a professional teacher.

On successful completion of the end of level test children will be eligible to join a Level 3 club.

Level 3 club: would usually not be run by schools (possible exceptions such as Twickenham Prep). Junior Chess Clubs would run groups at this level, feeding through from school chess clubs as appropriate. The idea is to prepare children for

adult competitive chess. Session length: 2-3 hours. Regular competitive chess is encouraged – internal championships with clocks and notation, participation in higher level junior tournaments (eg London Junior Chess Championships) and lower level open age rapidplay events (eg Minor section of Richmond Rapidplay). Sessions should be run by experienced players (say 125+ ECF strength).

Children who have completed this level successfully will be able to take part in tournaments on a regular basis and will not need a weekly club. However, a junior club should run training days (led by GMs or IMs) for players at this level perhaps once a month on days when there are no major junior tournaments in the area.

I'd like to see as many children as possible completing the first level so that they can experience low-level competitive chess. No doubt the majority will be happy to have learnt a skill and to be able to play reasonable games with their friends, but those who wish to continue will be able to do so, usually through a junior chess club which will prepare them for higher level competitive chess.

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