

Parents - some thoughts before sending your kids to their first tournaments

If your child is just embarking into the world of competitive chess, if she or he is thinking about playing in that first Saturday tournament, then you, as a parent or a coach, need to prepare yourself as well. For most children, especially those in K-3, a chess tournament will be different than any other sporting event in which they have participated.

Alone. During the game, they are alone. Just them, the opponent, 64 squares, and 32 pieces. No talking. No friends. No physical way to relieve stress. Parents and coaches aren't even allowed in the room. This can be very tough. It can also be very rewarding. As a parent, as a coach, you need to be prepared to offer support and encouragement. Keep the focus on improvement. Don't focus too much on winning, and don't focus on just "survival." The kids are smart. If you downplay winning, they will know they aren't doing well. Instead, manage their expectations before, during, and after the tournament. Teach them a process of improvement from tournament to tournament, not just from game to game.

A good approach is to have an honest discussion before the tournament about how well the child can do. If they are just learning, focus on keeping accurate chess notation. Explain that there are many good players and a goal of winning one or two games would be VERY good for a first tournament. Create little goals that they can control. Did they get all of their men out in every game? Did they ask themselves before every move what captures or checks there were in the position?

Find, measure, reinforce, and celebrate SMALL, MEASURABLE, and REACHABLE goals for them to work on. Repeat messages consistently: "Our goal (not just their goal!!) is to get better in every tournament. After while, the winning will come by itself."

Watch the movie Searching for Bobby Fischer with your child. Certainly, some things are exaggerated to help tell a multi-year story in two hours. But remember key points, and, when things get tough in a tournament you can say -- "Hey, remember when Josh had that problem?" Kids get this stuff -- they identify with it, and the examples help them a great deal.

DO NOT tell them what not to do, especially as the last reminder before a game. There isn't a more certain way to make them mess up. Let me illustrate: Don't think about pink elephants. What's the first thing that came to mind? You see, the human brain is wired to think about things, not to avoid thinking about things. So leave them with a positive message. Wrong: "Don't bring your Queen out early." Right: "Remember, bring all of your men out early, and bring your Queen out last, after all the other pieces are out."

Stress is a big factor. I've had kids that love tournaments that still literally toss their cookies before every game. Find stress relievers. For some kids, a gentle stroke on the back is re-assurance. For others, this lets them know that their parents are nervous about them being nervous -- so it just makes it worse. Learn to re-focus their brain. For one youngster I would make a funny face before every game in the tournament room when no one was looking. It would crack him up, be our secret, and get his mind off the big game.

Reinforce how to correct errors, but believe me, the kids will kick themselves about their mistakes, so you usually don't have to do anything to make this a big point. Tears are o.k. In fact, there are times when, under the right circumstance, I've even encouraged this. Let them know that feeling bad is o.k., and to avoid it next time, here is a positive step that we can take to improve our game. Many kids do very well with this dose of reality so long as you are supportive and they understand that you are there to help them, not to criticize them. Remember, they have not teammates, no bad refs, no weather, nothing else to blame this on. When they lose, they will know it's because they were outplayed, and a realistic approach to improvement offers hope and encouragement for the next game.

Distinguish between stupid moves and the fact that you are not calling the child stupid. We all make mistakes, we all started out as beginners, and it takes time to get better. I will often share

a story that as an 11 year old I lost 100 games at Rook odds to a high school friend before I won a single game -- and I became a Master. They can too, but improvement takes time and persistence. Moves can be bad, dumb, stupid, stinky, etc. Children are not. Most important of all -- have fun. Rejoice and celebrate in your improvements, savor the victories, and have a good time.

[FIDE](#) Master and Illinois chess coach [Kevin L. Bachler](#) is author of [Caveman Chess](#).