

# How to **Beat** Your **KIDS** at **Chess**

An Adult Beginner's Guide to Chess

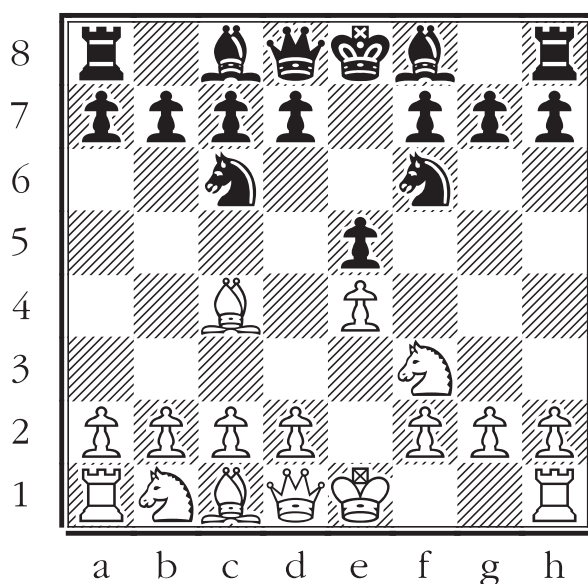


**2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION**

by David MacEnulty

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Second Edition



2012

Russell Enterprises, Inc.  
Milford, CT USA

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To all my students at C.E.S. 70 in the Bronx.  
You continue to inspire.

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# Introduction

This is a book for adult beginners. Adult beginners generally fall into five categories.

1. Adults who have a child who is learning to play chess and they want to help their child learn, or at least understand what it is that their little one is learning;
2. Adults who have been thrust into a position at a school where they are in charge of the chess program. They have limited knowledge of the game, need to improve rapidly, and find ways to help the children in their program progress;
3. Adults who know very little about the game and have no formal training so their friends always beat them;
4. Adults who always wanted to learn to play chess but are afraid that it may be too late; and
5. Adults who are looking for an interesting way to keep their mind active.

Let's take these in reverse order.

## **Adults who are looking for an interesting way to keep their mind active.**

In learning to play chess you embark on a journey that will stimulate, develop, enhance and challenge every thinking skill known to man or woman. Mental activity is like physical activity. When you exercise your muscles, your body is energized. When you exercise your brain, your mind is energized. Chess is a gymnasium for the brain.

In every chess game the players must recognize patterns, categorize and classify information, establish a hierarchy of values, calculate sequences of moves, interpolate moves within the sequence, reason by analogy, compare and contrast various structures and values, and make exciting leaps of the imagination. Every part of the brain is excited in the quest to find favorable outcomes and avoid those that will cause a deterioration of the position.



The architecture of the brain is amazing. The brain contains approximately 100 billion neurons, or brain cells, and for each neuron there are at least 10 glia, or support cells. During development, all of these complicated cells organize into vast interconnecting and interacting networks. Scientists once believed that these networks were solidified by adulthood. Now, however, we know this is not the case. Brain cells continue to develop and reorganize in a multitude of ways as we age—as long as we keep them active and challenged. As the brain is exercised, new connections are made, new neuronal networks are formed and the mind is kept alive and active. Indeed, scientists have found that one of the best ways to maintain mental acuity into old age is to keep challenging the brain with stimulating activities. Neurologists have observed the neuronal interplay within the brain of people playing chess and found the whole brain teeming with activity. Chess is an ideal method of keeping the mind alert and active, from kindergarten to age ninety and beyond.

## **Adults who always wanted to learn to play chess but are afraid that it may be too late.**

I have also heard many adults wistfully lament that they never learned to play chess and wonder if it is too late for them, now that they are adults. Some think that children learn faster than adults. Well, let me tell you, adults learn much faster than children. We adults have a huge background of relevant information that we can draw on to support new learning. When things make sense they fall into place much faster in the adult mind than in a child's mind. The problem adults have is not in the ability to take in new information; most of us are just too busy with our job or other adult activities to compare favorably with a child's intake of information. It is the child's *job* to learn. We have our own jobs already. However, I am convinced that with just a brief period of working through this book every day, or every other day, or even twice a week, any literate adult can learn the basics of chess very quickly. I am convinced of this for a very good reason: I have seen it happen, repeatedly. An adult can learn in half

an hour what a first grader will learn in six hours. Chess *is* a complex game. However, the ideas behind it are simple. If you can recognize a straight line, count to eight and know the first eight letters of the alphabet, you know all you need to know to start learning chess.

Some have said they do not have the mind for chess, or the patience, or the discipline, or have some other reason for thinking they cannot learn the game. Interestingly, the people who say these things are often people with a vast array of skills that have direct chess applications. If you are wondering if you have the mind, patience or discipline for chess, I am confident this book will answer your question in the affirmative, and you will discover that you can indeed learn chess.

### **Adults who know very little about the game and have no formal training so their friends always beat them.**

“I keep losing to my friends!” I hear this sad lament often from people who only know how the pieces move but have never been told of the scientific principles that govern good play in chess. Learning the basic principles is relatively easy, and many of them are to be found in this book; learning to apply them to the seemingly infinite variety of positions on the chess board takes practice and study. However, by the time you finish this book, you will be well on your way to either winning more games or at least understanding what you need to do to get to the next level. If you are in this category, this book will put you way ahead of where you are now.

### **Adults who have been thrust into a position at a school where they are in charge of the chess program. They have limited knowledge of the game, need to improve rapidly, and find ways to help the children in their program progress.**

I have also encountered many adults who have very limited knowledge of the game but have found themselves in charge of

school chess programs. It is this group that was the inspiration for this book. I have met many such people, in the United States, the Caribbean and in South Africa. If you are one of these, this book is for you. The order of presentation in this book and the exercises found here will be very beneficial for your students as they learn the game.

In teaching chess to children, it is essential that they grasp each idea fully, and have ample opportunity to practice the ideas presented. We are teaching the process for achieving success as much as we are teaching chess. One of the biggest problems in teaching is finding the right order in which to present the material to be learned. When ideas are introduced in a clear and progressive order, learning flows easily. When we jump from one idea to another with no relationship between them, learning is disjointed, confused and frustrating. The order of ideas presented in this book has been proven to be remarkably effective. Children in the United States who have followed these ideas have won numerous city, state and national championships.

For teachers who would like more supplemental exercises, or suggestions on how to move beyond this book, email me at [dmacenuity@aol.com](mailto:dmacenuity@aol.com).

## **Adults who have a child who is learning to play chess and want to help their child learn, or at least understand what it is that their little one is learning;**

I have heard many parents say their child isn't really very good at chess, and then six months or a year later confess that they don't have a chance against their kid anymore. I used to joke about one day writing a book for these parents so they could beat their kid again. A few parents actually pressed me on this, so here is the book.

In spite of the rather whimsical title, I do not really advocate beating your child at chess (or anything else for that matter). I am also not a huge fan of the parent as instructor (with exceptions, of course), simply because a lot of extra parent/child baggage can creep into the lessons. Although it can be a wonderful thing for

parents to play chess with their children, there are a few little tricks to know that can make the experience both more enjoyable and more educational. For example, if the adult has a winning position, turn the board around and let the child try to find the winning continuation. You may find yourself turning the board around several times in one game. If your child has just blundered a piece, instead of taking it you might ask, “what do you think I am going to do next?” It helps to give an encouraging smile as you say it, and let the child take the move back when she finds the error. The adult should also add that in a real game you are not allowed to take moves back, but since you are just practicing it is okay to. That takes the seriousness out of the event while at the same time reinforcing that there are real protocols to the game.

## **The Game of Chess**

Chess is a board game that is mainly based on the skills of the players. In a normal chess game, two players face each other across a checkered board, each with an army or team of eight pieces and eight pawns that the players move around the board according to a precise set of rules. The object of the game of chess is to trap and attack the opposing player’s king. That is called *checkmate*, and the first player to do that wins the game.

Chess has been called an art, a science, a sport and a game. It is all of these and more; in chess we find surprising twists and turns, aesthetic delights, occasional humor, and powerful emotional implications.

So what happens in a chess game? Two players sit across a checkered board, deep in thought. To an observer, nothing much seems to be happening. The two players, however, know otherwise. Their eyes race over the board, scrutinizing every piece, every pawn and every square, maneuvering pieces in their minds as they try to find ways for the various units on their team to work together in planning their attacks and ways to defend. Strategic and tactical considerations lie hidden everywhere in this microcosm of the real

world, waiting to be discovered by the discerning player. As the two analyze problems and test solutions, patterns emerge and subside, a cataract of beautiful ideas cascade into a sea of possibilities.

As a war game, chess is tremendously exciting. War is of course a terrible thing, but the charm of chess is that it is a game. It is a struggle between two minds, most often between the minds of people who respect each other and enjoy one another's company. Marcel DuChamp famously said that "chess is a sport—a violent sport." That is true, but the violence is elegant; no one is hurt when the pieces leave the board, and that makes all the difference. Ultimately chess is, in the words of Grandmaster Lev Albert, "a battle of beautiful ideas." It is the quintessential gymnasium of the mind.

## **The Process for Achieving Success**

This book is as much about the processes for achieving success in anything as it is about learning chess. Whether you are an adult working through this for personal pleasure and achievement or someone who will be working with children, learning to succeed is essential. Those of us who teach children should be teaching *how* to learn as well as *that you can learn successfully*. Success and failure are both learned.

## **What is Success?**

It can be and has been defined in many ways, but my definition is very simple: success is doing something better than you did before, whatever the domain. If I learn something I did not know before, that is a success. If I can do something now that I could not do before, that is a success. It isn't necessary to be the absolute best to be considered successful.

Many of us have had the unfortunate experience of 'learning' that we are not very good at something, mainly because someone—often, I am ashamed to say, a teacher—demonstrated our gross incompetence, usually in a very embarrassing setting, to one and

all. We *learned* to fail at the hands of a person who did not have the knowledge or the techniques to impart the information, or the interest in us to help us succeed. I constantly meet people who have been deprived of the joys of math, music, art, language, sports, and other skills and activities because of someone who was insensitive or incompetent or both. And of course there is the much more positive story: the teacher who inspired us to do more, who excited us about the joys of learning, who provoked our curiosity and led us to the thrill of discovery. These teachers looked on our mistakes as opportunities to clarify, they encouraged us to continue, and made sure we succeeded.

For some people, those very few at the top of their field, being the absolute best is all that matters. To the rest of us, however, who never even consider becoming the world champion, that mindset has nothing to do with the pleasure and excitement we can derive from our chosen activities. The joys of chess are open to all, whatever level we may aspire to or actually reach. Everyone from beginner to World Champion can enjoy this great game.

These ideas are essential for those who will be teaching chess (or anything else) to children. We need to insure that our children are successful by teaching them in ways that lead to success. We need to give them exercises that they can perform well, graduating from the simple to the more complex in ways that are stimulating and challenging.

## **Begin with What You Already Know**

In learning a new skill or subject, the best way to begin is to start with something you already know. With that in mind, we will begin our exploration of the great game of chess with the simplest of ideas—the straight line—and build from there. In this book I assume no knowledge of the game whatsoever on the part of the reader. We will begin at the very beginning, with what I call “pre-chess skills.” You may wonder why I begin at such an elementary level, as these things are all well known to any reasonably educated adult.



These basic ideas are included for three reasons. First, by beginning with the fundamental concepts that are already known, you will easily breeze through the first section and realize that learning the basics of chess is not going to be nearly as intimidating or difficult as many people imagine. Second, we establish a framework of shared terminology, which eases communication for the rest of the book. Third, and very importantly, many adults who work through this book will at some point work with or play with children. Teaching young children, even those in kindergarten, should begin with the easily understood ideas presented in Chapter 1.

While this book covers a large amount of material, there is a clear and orderly presentation of the information, the ideas all make sense, and there are plenty of exercises for you to practice each idea before moving on to the next.

There is also a lot of repetition. Repetition is the mother of retention. You may see an idea once, and then find it repeated a few pages later. This is intentional, as the more times you see a new idea, the more firmly it becomes ingrained in the mind.

## **One Idea at a Time**

I am a firm believer in incremental learning. Learn one idea at a time. Learn one thing, see how it relates to other things you already know, and then practice it until the idea is firmly planted in your mind. Then learn another idea, and another, and another, going through the same process each time. Success at each stage brings about the confidence to continue as you move upwards to ever more complex ideas. Pretty soon you look back and notice that you have accumulated a rather large body of knowledge.

In this book we will just take one step at a time. Enjoy each new firm foothold and push on from there. In learning chess the maxim that ‘the journey is the point of the trip’ should be the guiding thought. Soon enough you will find that you have in fact arrived somewhere. Your first indication of that will be when you start recognizing some of the patterns that give chess its beauty, reliability and consistency.

## Patterns

Patterns are a major concept in chess. A pattern is just something that occurs again and again. Everything from horseback riding to house painting, from preparing a legal brief to writing a poem, from practicing a musical instrument to washing dishes, from getting dressed in the morning to going to bed at night, is a collection of patterns.

The person who has the deeper understanding of the patterns and the most creative imagination in applying them will be the more successful, whatever the field. The more chess patterns you learn and incorporate into your thinking, the better you will play. Chess masters may know tens of thousands of patterns, but they learned them one at a time.

The skills learned from chess are quite exciting and inspiring in and of themselves, but these skills are not limited to moving wooden or plastic pieces around a checkered board. The patterns of chess go in so many directions that it is difficult to find an unrelated field. Benjamin Franklin said, “Life is a kind of chess.” World Champion Bobby Fischer changed that to, “Chess *is* life.” The great chess author/teacher Bruce Pandolfini tweaked them both with his humorous observation that “Chess isn’t life; *it’s much more important!*”

When you learn patterns in one area, surprising connections to other seemingly unrelated fields suddenly become apparent. But playing chess is not just a recollection of patterns and a series of calm calculations with a cold mathematical precision.

## Persistence

Success comes with persistence. When we discover that we can be successful at one thing, we believe we can be successful at the next. We get more confident, and when we are more confident, we succeed more, and thus, instead of the popular downward spiral of defeat, we have an upward trajectory toward triumph. The success stemming from failure comes only if you recognize the error and



applaud the new knowledge you have gained, not wallowing in the mistake but taking it as a new lesson learned. For the price of a chess game, you have increased your knowledge and understanding. Not a bad trade.

## Chess, Emotions and Problem Solving

As we go through a typical day, we constantly encounter problems, most of which are so minor they have no real significance. Sometimes, however, there are rather profound emotional attachments. In chess, as in the rest of life, our attitude towards these events is the most important determining factor in how we approach the problem, the manner in which we seek solutions, and how we emerge from the encounter.

In the midst of applying all the various thinking skills chess calls upon, there is a whirlwind of emotional activity as well. Chess is, after all, a game about winning and losing, with all the attendant emotional baggage associated with victory and defeat. Even stripping that away, a game of chess is essentially problem solving from beginning to end, and problems of any sort are famous for wrecking our equanimity.

One of many reasons I love teaching chess is that in the safe setting of a chess game, where the worst that can happen is that you lose a game, we can learn to overcome obstacles, face adversity, and persevere. I even use chess in my school classrooms as a means of teaching such seemingly remote concepts as empathy and integrity. With proper guidance, chess players can develop not only impressive thinking skills, but their emotional intelligence also can make major strides. Note the caveat at the beginning of that last sentence: *with proper guidance*. Those of us in the chess world have all known many examples of people who seem to be immune to the emotional sophistication that can be achieved through chess. To put it plainly, some chess players are complete jerks before, during, and after the game. They are the ones for whom winning is proof of their innate superiority, and losing only happens because they have a headache. But leaving them aside, as you delve deeper and deeper

into the fascinating world of the sixty-four squares, you will find countless ways chess relates to your daily life.

## **Winning and Losing**

When playing a game, the players need to recognize beforehand that unless the game ends in a tie (chess players call a tie game a draw), there will be a winner and a loser. While winning is the most fun, nobody wins all the time, so it is a good idea before you play to understand that losing can actually be a good thing.

If you lose at chess, it is often because the other player knew something you did not know. If the other player knew more, then you have an opportunity to learn something, and that will make you a better player in the future. So losing can actually be the path to learning, and learning is always a good thing. Appreciate good moves, whether they are yours or your opponent's.

## **Courtesy and Sportsmanship**

In playing any game, the players should always show respect for each other. Chess players should be respectful of the other player's feelings before, during and after a game of chess.

Before the game begins, the players shake hands. That handshake is a promise to play a good fair game. When the game is over, the players shake hands again. This time the handshake means the competition between the players is over and both players accept the result of the game. During the final handshake it is considered polite to say, "Thank you for the game," whether you won or lost.

## **Failure Equals Opportunity**

One of the most important lessons to be learned from chess is that failure is not a definition of who you are, but is simply an indication of what you need to work on. If I fall for a certain kind of checkmate, it doesn't mean I am an idiot or a lower life form. It just means I need to learn more about that pattern or need to be more focused during the time of performance at the chessboard. In

working with children, this is one of the most important concepts to get across *before they start to play, and should be reinforced frequently.*

When playing a game of chess, play with all the energy and imagination you can, and admire and enjoy good moves, whether they are yours or your opponent's. One of my favorite games ever occurred when I was in the navy in Spain. With no formal chess training at the time, I played an International Master who marched his pieces right down the center of the board, pushed my poor players out of the way, harried my wretched king before it could retreat to safety and in twelve short moves I was dead and buried.

As he brought each new piece into play I could feel the effects of a dazzling mind at work. With each move, my ineptitude was brought into clear focus. It would have been easy to walk away from that experience with the notion that I had absolutely no business ever going near a chess game again (there are those who still think that of me, but that's another story).

What made that game so important for me was what happened next. I asked, "How did you do that?" The Master (I am embarrassed that I never did learn his name) then spent two hours giving me the greatest lesson I have ever had in chess. He explained that the center is the most important part of the board, the beginning of the game is a race to get the pieces off the back row and into the field of play, and the king needs to find a safe haven away from the thick of the battle. And of course he covered a number of other ideas as well, many of which are in this book. Although I have lost many games since, no one has ever been able to dismantle my position so thoroughly since that day in Spain. Failure, if we view it as an opportunity to learn, is the best thing that can happen to a chess player.

I had great fun over the next several months, applying the ideas I learned that afternoon in Barcelona to games with my shipmates in the navy. The patterns I learned from the master led to many enjoyable victories.

So let us begin by learning some of the patterns of chess.