

# Schools teach chess to help 'difficult' pupils concentrate

Game takes off in primaries as a way to lure pupils away from their phone screens



**i** Pupils at a chess tournament organised by Chess in Schools and Communities for primary schools Photograph: Ray Morris-Hill

The year 3 pupils at Park End Primary School in Middlesbrough are a bit of a rowdy bunch. Headteacher Julia Rodwell describes them as “a complex and difficult group”. Put them in front of a chess set though, and silence descends.

“The first time I saw them playing chess, I was absolutely gobsmacked. Their concentration is incredible - I’ve never seen anything like it in any other lesson,” says Rodwell.

Park End is one of 800 primaries to add chess to its curriculum - a threefold increase over two years. A desire to improve maths and problem solving is part of the motivation, but as schools grapple with screen addiction and short attention spans, chess is also seen as a way to encourage “digital detox”. Rodwell has been so impressed that all her staff have now been trained to teach chess.

For her, the way chess has brought children out of their shell has been overwhelming. “Teachers rush over to me saying, ‘come down and look at this child - she can’t do simple sums, but she’s beating everyone in the class at chess!’

“We’re in a very deprived area, so chess is not something our children have traditionally come across - but we’ve embraced it as a whole school,” she says.

Up and down the country other schools are embracing it too, with 20 signing up every month. “Children are born into a world of touchscreens and instant response. Playing chess encourages them to sit down, concentrate and think hard, instead of tapping away,” says Malcolm Pein, founder of [Chess in Schools and Communities](#), the charity which devises and runs the classes.

Pein, a former chess professional, says one of the goals is to get kids “unplugged” and spend more time with their parents this summer, building “skills, resilience and grit”. His inspiration for setting up the charity, eight years ago, came out of teaching chess to immigrant children in Tower Hamlets, London, in the 1980s. “I saw the transformational effect on these children. They were living in tiny council flats, above chip shops, and we turned them into national champions. It was fantastic. Then the funding ran out.”

Breaking down the perceived elitism of chess is still a big part of the drive. “It’s about giving children in state schools the same opportunities children have in private schools,” Pein says.

That ambition appears to be bearing fruit. For example, Liverpool’s Sacred Heart Catholic Primary - which has a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils - has just reached the finals of the ECF national schools championships, which take place next month, beating an army of private schools along the way.

Richard Graham, consultant child psychiatrist at London’s Nightingale Hospital, believes that the use of chess in the curriculum shows how schools are increasingly trying to develop “real pleasure and engagement in activities that are offline”. And he thinks that the competitive elements of the game are crucial to why it’s proving so popular. “You’ve got really interesting pieces - like the knight, with its unusual moves - and there’s power in the sense of the king and queen. All of these elements bring excitement and engagement.”


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“We’re high pupil premium, we have a lot of EAL [English as an additional language] children, the families don’t have a lot of money - but parents are really keen to get behind the chess. It’s changed their outlook,” says Lesley Roach, the school’s headteacher.

The tournaments, she adds, have been a big boost to children’s self-esteem, and a leveller for some of the quieter ones who don’t normally contribute in lessons. It has also helped the confidence of children who don’t have English as a first language.

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Roach has little doubt that chess is helping reduce the amount of time children spend on computers and gadgets, or watching TV. “It’s given them something else to do outside school,” she says. That’s a view echoed by Park End’s Rodwell. “The lunchtime chess club is always full, but not our iPad club,” she says.

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Someone who knows all about that excitement is grandmaster David Howell, top seed in next month’s British chess championships in Llandudno, Wales.

“In chess you have to plan, you have to get inside your opponent’s head, you have to be focused at all moments. So yes, as a way of getting kids to unplug it’s a great idea. Unplug everything!” he says.

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