

Conflict-based play

reduces violence



INCREASING NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN OUR SCHOOLS ARE ENGAGING IN A FORM OF CONFLICT-BASED PLAY THAT, TEACHERS REPORT, IS LEADING TO *REDUCED* VIOLENCE, BULLYING AND OTHER BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN STUDENTS. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT IT IS, **DAVID CORDOVER** HAS THE ANSWER: IT'S CALLED CHESS.

Say the words 'chess' and 'education' and most educators automatically think of educational benefits in terms of problem solving and memory. Many studies have shown its value as a tool to teach mathematics and in the development of various critical thinking skills. What many don't realise, however, is that chess has a softer side. Those involved in chess in schools have known it for many years, but as the game increases in popularity in Australian schools, others are beginning to realise its true power and have the student success stories to prove it.

Participation in chess is growing at a phenomenal rate. When the National Chess Kids Interschool Chess Championships first started in 2002 there were 890 children

involved. In 2009 there are now more than 9,500 children taking part – an eleven-fold growth. So it makes sense that as 'check mate' echoes through more school corridors, more benefits are being seen – and some are coming as a surprise. The soft benefits, relating to socially-based skills, are now being recognised by teachers who witness some remarkable transformations in students with low confidence or self-esteem, or social or behavioural difficulties, and with bullying and violence high on the agenda for schools, the benefits certainly shouldn't be ignored.

A national survey of more than 200 Australian schools conducted by Chess Kids earlier this year found that 98 per cent of teachers say chess has many soft skill benefits

in addition to the commonly discussed hard benefits. Soft areas positively influenced by regular chess play include decision making, confidence and self-esteem, resilience, general behaviour, anger management and self control, making it a valuable preventive tool for educators working to reduce violence, bullying and other behavioural problems in students.

When you look at the behaviour and thinking patterns that chess encourages, it's not hard to see why it has such a positive effect on these areas. Its influence on self-confidence is possibly its most powerful. One reason is that chess doesn't discriminate – it invites students of all ages, athletic abilities, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds

and academic levels to sit down and enjoy a game, and in doing so attain a sense of personal success and respect from peers. Often students who might not be performing strongly in the classroom will excel at chess, and the self-confidence that generates frequently carries over into their academic work. High achievers also often find that chess earns them respect from others and gives them an opportunity to interact with children from different social groups.

Chess also develops reasoning skills that have a prevent effect on students' tendencies to express anger or act violently. The game requires students to strategise game-play and think ahead about the repercussions of their moves – an ability to reason that offers a way to address conflict. Chess-playing students learn that by thinking a problem through they can always identify alternative solutions. While doing this, chess also shows students that every action creates a reaction. The pattern encouraged is one that involves stopping, thinking to consider the results of alternative actions. Students who understand this are less likely to jump to quick conclusions and overact in situations of conflict.

Chess also promotes respect for others, which is an important trait in preventing bullying and violence. Chess is essentially a battleground on a board that demands respect for one's opponent. While it encourages competitiveness it does this by promoting fair play, logic, calm and controlled thinking, losing gracefully, and success through forethought and strategy. An ability to deal with competitive situations in this way carries over positively into the classroom and playground.

David Cordover is the managing director of Chess Kids, which conducts coaching programs in schools throughout Australia and runs the annual National Interscholar Chess Championships.

LINKS:
www.chesskids.com.au

IN CHESS-PLAYING SCHOOLS, THERE ARE TWO SEPARATE YET EQUALLY IMPORTANT GROUPS: THE STUDENTS WHO PLAY CHESS AND THE TEACHERS WHO TEACH THEM. THESE ARE THEIR STORIES.

Overactive children, particularly boys, have been well behaved at interschool tournaments because they have been engaged in playing chess. I think this is because they like the sense of playing a battle, and if they lose they will come back another day.

We have several children who regularly participate in our chess programs and experience success and enjoyment in a structured social setting. Some of these children struggle in the playground with less structure and tend to get into mischief.

Probably the most noticeable thing I see with students is the improvement in self-confidence, but also the admiration that other students show those students. Some students in our school who are involved with chess who have some social or interpersonal issues very rarely represent the school in a sporting area, so they have a chance at public recognition by being involved in interschool chess. We encourage students to share their knowledge and play chess tournaments for this reason as well as trying to broaden the social network of shy or socially inept students.

I have students who have poor self-esteem or concentration and present with problematic behaviours in the classroom who are able to relax during chess time and fully focus.

Students who may not have been perceived to be in the 'in crowd' and have excelled in chess have been recognised within the school. They are then perceived as 'smart' and become more socially accepted. Students who haven't played chess have taken note and asked them about chess with a genuine interest. Not only can it benefit on a social level, but psychologically the students that

are involved have a genuine air of confidence which in turn results in a higher standard of behaviour, simply through their own involvement in chess. It has a real flow-on effect.

I've been privileged to witness many benefits to many students. One group of young aboriginal boys with very low literacy levels made it to a very high level in a state competition.

Students who have won games may not have had much success elsewhere and to see them smiling as they are presented with a certificate in assembly is great.

I run a chess club at lunch times and I'm always astonished that it's often the students identified as overactive and difficult to manage who really enjoy the quiet challenges that chess games offer.

One student who had a very difficult upbringing, resulting in a range of psychological and social issues, gained self-confidence from his success in chess, and enjoyed sharing his ideas and knowledge with other students.

By learning to take turns and having to comply with the rules and etiquette of the game, students improve in behaviour, and in their attitude to school and life in general.

I've seen some of my students go from being a loner to mixing well with others. I've had a number of kids with behaviour problems learn positive self control and improve their ability to concentrate. A few have even learnt that they can't always have things go their own way all of the time.