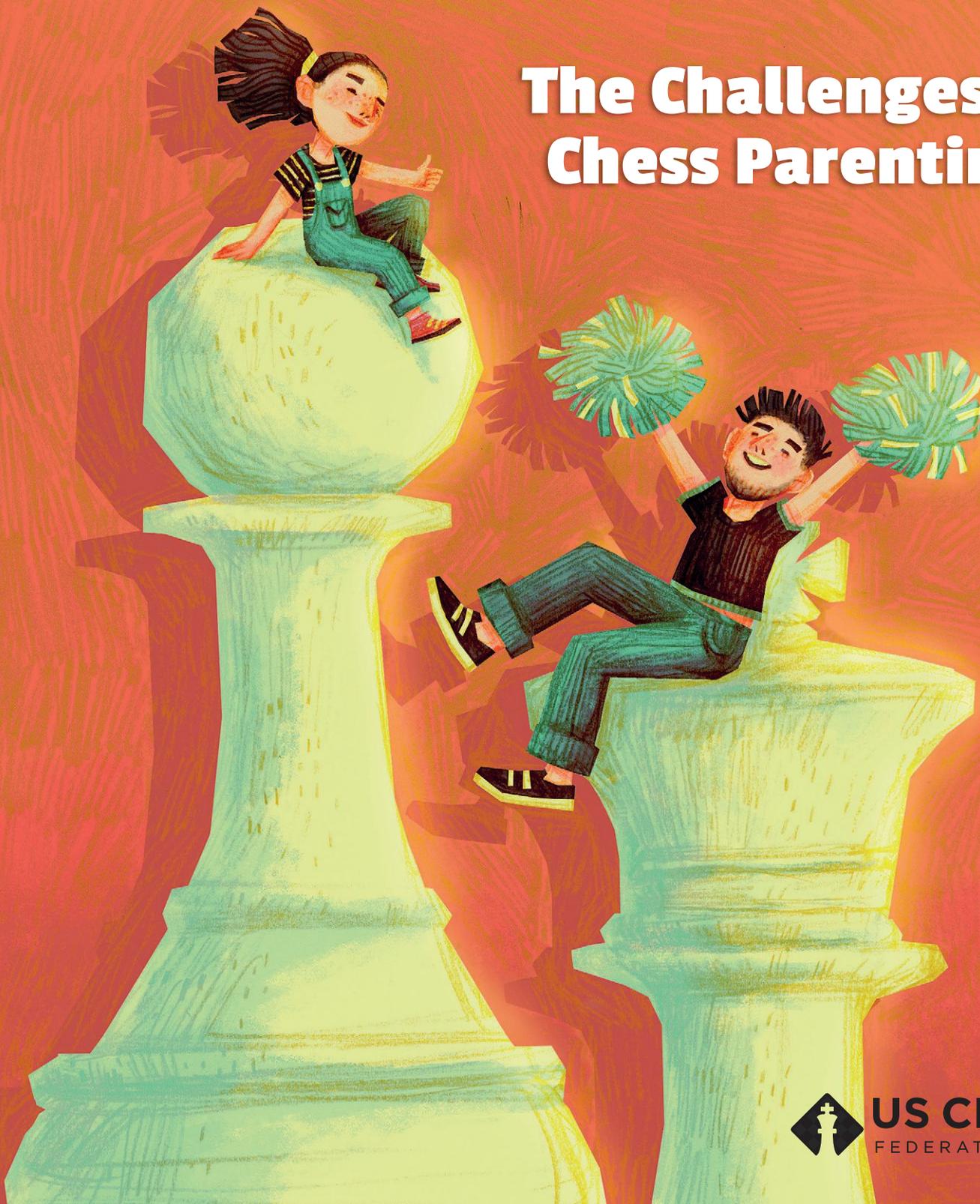


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# CHESSLIFE

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## The Challenges of Chess Parenting



**US CHESS**  
FEDERATION

# THE CHALLENGES OF Chess Parenting

How do you help your children reach their potential without damaging their self-confidence—or yours?

By **JENNIFER VALLENS** | Art by **CARLOTTA NOTARO**

It's not easy being a chess parent. It all started the day I picked up my six-and-a-half-year-old son from an afterschool chess class. "I won a chess set because I beat the teacher!" A few days later, he won first place in his first Academic Chess tournament. I will never forget how I felt when one of the chess instructors said to me, "Your kid has talent."

I always knew my child was special, but to hear it said back to me from someone else filled my heart and yes, my ego, with pride.

I quickly found out that not only does my child have a talent for chess, but so do a great many other children. And so the competition began.

I didn't consider myself in competition as a chess mom until I attended my first US Chess-rated tournament. I felt the first stirrings of concern when we arrived at the hall and immediately noticed a crowd swarming a sheet of paper that was tacked to a bulletin board. Anxious, I fought my way to the board and discovered it listed the pairings. My son and I scurried through rows of chess tables to find

the correct board number and I scrambled to help him get situated. As I looked across the table, I locked eyes with a smirking 10-year-old whose icy stare first pierced me, and then my son. His parent stood behind him, calm as a cucumber, setting the clock and proudly snapping the child's photo. Under the camera's gaze, his wicked smile morphed into an ear-to-ear grin.

I gave my son a kiss on the cheek, wished him good luck (as a new chess parent, little did I know that saying good luck to a chess player is actually considered bad luck!), and backed away from the board. All I could hear was the muffled sounds of the tournament director making some type of announcement mixed with the chatter of adult voices and the rustling of pieces being set up. As I moved away, I was rounded up and herded out the door with the rest of the cattle, leaving my young child to fend for himself. It felt like I was feeding him to the wolves.

I found an empty spot and sat cross-legged

on the hideous carpeted floor in the hotel's hallway to wait. I had brought a book with me and tried to distract myself with my phone, but the pit in my stomach remained. I crossed my fingers, hoping my son would come out the double doors with a smile on his face.

I waited ... and waited ... and waited. I hoped the game was not over too quickly because that would mean someone smoked the other and god forbid my child was the one left in the dust.

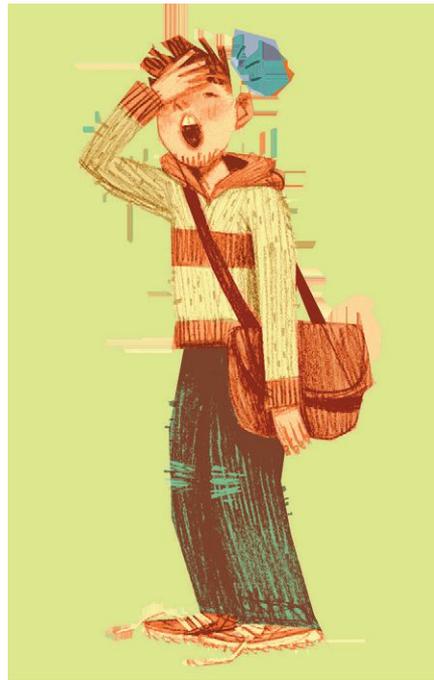
As I perused the hotel lobby, I sensed controlled chaos. The waiting parents all passed the time differently. Some were laughing, some biting nails, one was knitting. Others chatted familiarly while their other children ran amok. The steady buzz of competing voices became almost calming. I thought to myself, "So these are chess parents. Soon they will become my people."

Fast forward to present: After attending countless tournaments and having organized 13 of my own, I've gotten to know my tribe pretty well. I've noticed that chess parents tend to fall into a few distinct categories:



### The Second Coach

The parent who think she's a coach. She tells her child what to study, how to play, and why he lost. Many do not even play chess themselves.



### The Hot Mess

The parent who comes late to every round, forgets his child's chess set, has to borrow a clock, and doesn't know what a pairing or a rating is.



### Helicopter Parent

The parent whose face is smashed up to the door/window of a scholastic tournament. This parent is always complaining and challenging the tournament director about pairings and tiebreaks.



### The Pressure Cooker

The parent who puts so much pressure on his child to perform that the child no longer wants to play but is forced to.



### Annoying Cheerleader

The parent who is overly enthusiastic. This parent high fives everyone and tells her child that it doesn't matter if she wins or loses. Ummm, your child just spent up to four hours trying to win a game and you tell her it doesn't matter?!



### The Prepared

The parent who comes with a chair and who might even have her own internet hotspot. Usually one or two siblings are in tow, each toting their own iPad. This parent often carries Tupperware containers filled with healthy snacks and always has an extra clock or set to borrow.



### Delusional Parent

The parent who thinks his kid is the next grandmaster.



### The Social Butterfly

The parent who seems to know everyone, chats with all the other parents, and knows each player by name.

I am not sure which one I am. To be honest, I see a little of myself in all of them.

Traveling to chess tournaments became a way for me to bond with my child. I shared in my son's victories and also in his defeats. I spent quality time with him—just the two of us—laughing, taking walks, and swimming in hotel pools. One of my biggest joys became watching my son as he and other kids sat cross-legged on the floor, laughing out loud while manically playing bughouse.

I began to see the same parents at the various events, and we quickly became friends without ever being formally introduced to one another. We discussed everything chess: coaches, ratings, the next tournament. I quickly learned that, while we all had the best of intentions, some parents put the game and winning before their child. I started to notice how parents reacted at the end of each round. Some parents would gently give their child a hug; I could not figure out if the child had won or lost their round. Then there were those parents who couldn't wait to utter the words, "Did you win?" I would hear disappointment in the parent's tone and see shame on the child's face right before the child would break out in tears or try to run away. These parents, instead of consoling their child, would disapprovingly interrogate the child about why they lost. I began to question if chess tournaments were, in fact, good for my child.

A chess parent, it seems, is not much different from the average "stage mom" or "soccer dad." The main difference I see is that if your child does poorly in a performance, you can blame the judge. If your child plays poorly on the field, you can blame the coach, the referee, even the weather. But, if your child performs poorly while playing chess, well, there is no one else to "blame."

According to US Chess, the primary age when most children begin playing chess is between six and eight years old. They drop off at around age 13 or high school level. The assumption is that they develop other interests—dating, basketball, college prep—or hit a ratings plateau, but my guess is that parents play a key role in whether their child continues to love the game or not.

In many of the interviews I conducted with elite chess players, nine out of 10 attributed their success to one or both of their parents for supporting them in their chess activities. But how does one support a child in chess?

There are many teachable moments in chess. Tournaments provide opportunities to grow personally along with your child. Unfortunately for some parents, tournaments become all about winning.

The more competitive parents I have met are heavily invested, personally and financially, in the progress of their chess-playing children. Often they spend hundreds of dollars on chess coaches and training. I have met parents who have hired grandmasters to coach their children who have not even reached 1000 in rating.

At one tournament I attended, I witnessed a high-level chess player, only about eight-years-old, who, for whatever reason, played an awful game. His loss—while significant based on his rating—did not justify the inexcusable way his father verbally mistreated him after the game. The boy's father ripped up his son's scoresheet, grabbed his son by the face, and berated him in front of others, shouting, "How could you blunder and lose that game?" The boy's mother appeared fearful of her husband's outrage and sadly did not come to her son's aid. Thankfully, another male parent stepped in, got in this man's face, and stood up for the boy. I still can recall the look of shame on the boy's face and it brings me to tears to this day.

I believe every parent wants the best for his child. Yet millions of parents unknowingly sabotage their child's chances for success. I am no different. When Millionaire Chess came about, my son's rating was close to 1600. If he gained just a few more points prior to the ratings cutoff date, he would have to jump to the next (higher) section and therefore lessen his chances of winning big money. What to do? I

consulted two grandmasters, both of whom told me not to think about ratings; my son should play in the tournament without concern over his section. But the lure of big dollars was too intoxicating. I allowed my son to completely stop playing in tournaments just to maintain his rating.

However, at the Millionaire tournament, the pressure to perform became so great that my son ended up losing over 100 points. He not only lost rating points, but he sadly lost his confidence as well.

So how do you help your child reach their potential while also building their self-confidence? Some parents will do whatever they can to give their child the competitive edge—even resorting to manipulating the system. I have heard stories of parents who hold their child back a grade in school to give them a developmental advantage in academics. The same applies to chess: one parent I know boastfully shared that she homeschools her two children so she can enroll them in lower sections in scholastic chess tournaments. Parents also have been known to intentionally groom their child in chess but never register them to play in rated tournaments. Because the child does not have a rating, he can "play down" in the unrated section at national scholastic events. With his true playing strength under-represented, the child wins trophies and accolades.

"Playing up" can be just as seductive as playing down. Because a rating is the measure of performance in chess, a higher rating becomes the carrot motivating many parents to register their child to play up. Unfortunately, playing for rating instead of playing your best chess can create an impossible situation that can lead to low self esteem and depression for the player.

Playing up may make sense when you are 300 points away from the next rating category and you want to be challenged by stronger players, but there are kids who are 1000-level players playing in 1600 sections with no intention or expectation to win.

We experienced the negative consequences of playing up in 2015, when my son played board four on the NorCal Amateur Team West team. He was nine at the time and played someone rated 2000. My son ended up winning the round—my guess is that he intimidated his opponent simply by his age—and this upset gave him an inflated rating, but also an inflated ego. His team ended up winning the tournament and was featured on the May 2015 cover of *Chess Life* magazine.

As a parent, I was thrilled with his success and recognition. Little did I know his success at this event would cause us to overestimate his playing strength, which would, in turn, lower his self-esteem and perpetuate a lack of confidence.

My son started playing up in all of his tournaments. He enjoyed the game, not necessarily because he was playing well, but because there was no pressure to perform. A loss was expected. If he managed to win a game, it was celebrated as a major upset and he was hailed as a superstar. But once he started playing in his appropriate section at scholastic tournaments—where he now was the top seed due to his inflated rating—he started losing to much lower-rated players. Losing round after round and tournament after tournament sent him into a downward spiral and caused so much anxiety that he no longer wanted to play chess.

According to chess coach and tournament director Jerry Yee, this issue of losing to lower-rated players and wanting to quit chess is common and tends to begin once a child reaches the top 100 lists for their age category. He begins to see a shift in the parents' involvement in their child's chess "careers" (we are talking about children as young as five and six!). These "lists" are the beginning of ratings pressure for the young player because they create a measure of comparison for a parent. Some parents get swept up with keeping their child on top and will resort to all sorts of tactics to do so.

As a chess parent, I was torn. My son no longer wanted to play in tournaments. He had so much anxiety. I did not know what to do.

Should I force him to play tournaments to overcome his anxiety? Should I let him quit chess knowing how much he loves the game? How could I get him to reclaim his passion for chess? It was heartbreaking to see my son suffer anxiety from an activity that originally brought him so much joy. I didn't want to pressure him, but I also didn't want to encourage quitting when things get tough.

Elliott Neff, national master and founder of Chess4Life, explains that ratings can be highly motivational in setting goals, but he advises setting goals no higher than 300 points above your current rating. He explains that setting the goal too high can be frustrating for players if it becomes unattainable.

Neff also believes that if your child is rated below 1600, there is no need to be concerned with her opponents' rating. He points out that one of two things tend to happen: "You're paired with a lower-rated player and that can lead to overconfidence. The problem is that the lower-ranked player may actually be stronger than the rating implies. The other issue is playing against a higher-ranked player, which can often lead to low self confidence, assuming a losing outcome, and, in turn, not putting forth 100 percent effort. It is simply much better to play each game the best you can."

"Never look at your opponents as 'ratings' because a rating is simply a record of past achievement. It does not define what is going to happen. People play chess, not ratings," advises Claudia Munoz, women's candidate master and president of the Texas Tech Knight Raiders chess club.

It isn't just the child who is pre-occupied with ratings. Unfortunately, parents sometimes put added pressure on their child to perform.

I asked my son what makes a good chess parent. His response? Parents who do not ask why they lost after a defeat. He named Gabrielle Eidelman's mom and Alex Costello's dad as great examples of good chess parents because they don't play chess at all and they don't hover over the board.

Speaking of hovering, the helicopter parents I mentioned before are those who are overly concerned about their children and do not give their children room to make their own mistakes and grow. These parents literally hover over their child, ready to swoop in and rescue them at the slightest sign of discomfort.

After speaking with several scholastic chess organizers, I found that the most common complaint from tournament directors is about these helicopter parents who always question the pairings, rulings and tie-breaks, and who constantly claim unfair practices. These parents tend to be the ones who shield their child from any possible disappointment and complain that their child should receive a trophy simply for participating. In my opinion, this is doing the child a disservice. Children need to learn how to take responsibility for their wins and their losses. They also need to learn how to advocate for themselves. Further, parents who step in and question others in front of their child take the focus off his game. This will undoubtedly affect their performance.

Saving our children from pain is something all parents want to do, but teaching our children how to tolerate distress is important to their emotional development. But the question then becomes: How much should we push? Finding the balance is not an easy task for any parent.

Sometimes taking a break from the pressures of competitive chess can be the best thing for a child.

After a disappointing bout of losses in a string of tournaments when she was 13, Claudia Munoz was left emotionally drained. Her father recounted her experience and wrote, "The pressure had built up and it was time to release it. I told her that if she never played chess again, I would continue to love her since my love for her was not conditional to a chess rating or to her playing the sport.

"Her tears were of happiness because she never thought I would say those words. I told her that I was disconnecting her from chess until she was emotionally ready to return to the game. She then finished a

commitment that she had in the Game 45/45 league where she won her two games and that was it since then."

Claudia engaged in other hobbies such as drawing. Eventually, she decided to come back to chess on her own and ended up receiving a scholarship to Texas Tech, where she now plays for their chess team.

Had Claudia's father insisted she continue competing in chess when she was 13, it might have created lasting emotional damage on her self esteem.

My approach with my son has been the same. I decided to take his lead and let him tell me when he was ready to play again. We began approaching tournaments as an opportunity to travel together and have fun. The focus was no longer on the chess tournament, but rather on playing good games. He has told me that he has played better chess because of it.

GM Yasser Seirawan believes "many players, especially younger players, quit chess not because they no longer enjoy playing, but because there is so much emphasis on studying and memorization that they can't afford the time to keep up with those few players who do study intensely. For kids, chess becomes too much like school."

Here's the takeaway: If your kid is self-motivated and lives and breathes chess, this will be evident and there will never be a need to push your child to study.

Magnus Carlsen's father Henrik says, "Don't push your kids into anything."

Henrik shared that he taught Magnus to play chess at five, but it wasn't until Magnus was eight that he showed interest of his own in chess. The decision to quit his studies and focus solely on chess was Magnus' and he was 16 at the time. Chess always came first for Magnus; Henrik and his wife never had to push him to train.

I know parents just like me have the best of intentions for their child. But sometimes, parents simply put their children under so much pressure to perform well that their children suffer serious consequences.

You may wonder why parents are not allowed in the playing hall of scholastic chess tournaments. It's because there's proof that children are distracted when their parents are in the room. Every tournament director I interviewed reported the number one challenge with running tournaments are parents questioning the tournament director decisions—and not just questioning, but arguing, fighting, demanding, and threatening—often in front of their children at the board.

As a scholastic tournament organizer myself, I can feel an immediate calm replace the nervous energy as soon as the parents leave the room.

Parents can cause an extreme amount of stress and anxiety prior to a game. Parents have been known for making comments purposely to intimidate their child's opponent. Sadly, what that parent is doing is teaching his child that he needs to resort to these tactics because his own ability may not be up to par.

As harmful as it is to intimidate an opponent before the game, the biggest mistake you can make as a parent is to punish your child for a loss by withdrawing emotionally from them. When a parent reminds her child how much time and money they are spending on lessons or becomes angry or distant after a loss of a round, a child begins to feel responsible for the emotional and financial security for the parent.

We as parents try to read our child's face to know if a thumbs up or down is in order. Will there be tears? Will there be fits of anger? Will we be celebrating? From what I have seen, a win usually elicits a sense of pride which is difficult for a child to hide; a loss, however, sometimes can be harder to tell.

I have seen parents meet their child after a loss with a roll of the eyes, a hand raised in disbelief, and an impatient, "SOOOO ...?" before launching into a public tongue-lashing filled with questions about why he lost. And so the shaming begins.

So how should we respond when our child comes out the doors

## Parent Perspective: Checkmated by a Third-Grader

*Adrian Roberts' children, Aston and Brielle, attend Success Academy (SA) Charter School in New York City, where they both participate in the school's chess club. Adrian recently blogged about his experiences as a chess parent, which we excerpt here:*

It's safe to say my family loves the game of chess. Whether my son Aston is challenging an adult chess player at Washington Square Park, or my daughter is asking me to review her opening moves after a tournament game, chess is often the focus of our free time. My kids are learning so much through [Success Academy Charter School's] chess program—and so am I!

I first learned how to play chess as a child growing up in Jamaica. But until Aston and Brielle enrolled at Success Academy Hell's Kitchen, I didn't know much about the tactics, strategy, patience, and effort that goes into any successful chess game. It's been so much fun to learn chess alongside my kids. Together as a family, we read chess books, spend time in local chess hubs like the Marshall Club and the Chess Forum—and practice our skills through fun puzzles and games. Aston and I love playing against one another—when he beat me for the first time last year, it was a bittersweet moment—I

was sad to lose, but so happy to see how far he'd come! Now, I look forward to the day my younger daughter Brielle will beat me.

Chess is an intense intellectual battle, and kids take losses personally. When my kids lose, I always encourage them to think about the next game and how they can prepare to do better next time. Success Academy's great coaches do the same. Many of our chess teachers, including [Robert] Lazorchak, are seasoned chess competitors themselves—though some even came from the legal or financial world to bring their passion for chess to scholars like Brielle and Aston.

Every day, I see the impact that playing chess has on my children. They're enthusiastic puzzle-solvers and the skills they're learning carry over to their schoolwork. Aston tends to be more diligent and careful when he plays chess than he is with his homework. When he rushes through his math work, I encourage him to slow down and remind him to carefully consider each step of the problem. Chess teaches and rewards patience, so we try and bring these lessons into their homework, too.

I love the impact SA's chess program has had on our kids and on us as a family, and I love sharing this passion with other families. Thanks to many mobile apps—and chessboards set up at many NYC parks—you can play chess outside, on the subway, or during a rainy day at home.

*Excerpt courtesy of Success Academy. Visit [successacademies.org/education-blog-post/parent-perspective-checkmated-by-a-third-grader-the-life-of-a-success-academy-chess-dad/](http://successacademies.org/education-blog-post/parent-perspective-checkmated-by-a-third-grader-the-life-of-a-success-academy-chess-dad/) for the full blog.*

after playing a grueling chess match? What I have learned from being a tournament organizer is that it is essential to know your child. You need to know whether your child needs a hug or some space. Either way, keep your mouth shut and just be there for them while they process their feelings.

Kids cannot be expected to behave in a mature manner. After a disappointment such as losing, acting out by crying or having a tantrum is developmentally appropriate for a child; in fact, what is not developmentally appropriate is the expectation for a small child to sit still and problem solve for four hours!

A good parent behaves in a mature manner and models good sportsmanship. Eswaran Ramalingam recounted a hard lesson he learned at the Pan Ams in Peru when his daughter was just under 12. His daughter, Women's International Master Ashritha Eswaran, had the black pieces and had brought a Chronos clock to use. Her opponent's parent argued that the Chronos clock was not approved by the tournament organizer and the players needed to use the tournament-approved clock. An argument ensued between Eswaran and the other parent in front of the kids. Ashritha ended up losing the game, which Eswaran now believes was due to the distraction prior to the round. Eswaran insists that children should not be exposed to what is happening behind the scenes. Their only focus and concern should be to play their best.

Some of the children I spoke to asked parents to please not give last-minute advice right before a round like, "Remember to castle." That is so annoying! And worse is when your dad tells you what you should have done differently in your game!"

At the 2013 SuperNationals V in Nashville, a free seminar was offered to address "how to be a good sports parent and coach." SuperNationals usually host more than 5,000 children from states across the country. Many organizers have mentioned doing similar workshops in the future.

Being a chess parent may be challenging, but it is also extremely rewarding. For me, the best part about being a chess parent is bonding

with my child and being part of the chess community. Watching my child progress and mature is certainly a highlight for me. Even though there is frustration with the waiting and uncertainty and wanting to save my child from heartache and disappointment, the joy of seeing him problem solve and build his self confidence is priceless.

Chess parents face so many questions: What tournaments should my child play in? What section? How often should she be studying? What openings should he be studying? Is blitz going to be bad for his long game? Should he get exercise or rest during rounds or should he analyze games between rounds? Or maybe she should figure out who her next round opponent is so she can study up on their play? Does my child need a coach? Should I let him stay up and play in late-night blitz during a tournament?

While I can't answer these questions for you—and I certainly grapple with some of them myself—I do know the ways you can support your child include:

### **FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY.**

Buy your child a chessboard, sign up for a [chesskid.com](http://chesskid.com) or [chess.com](http://chess.com) account, borrow chess books from the library, start a chess club, find local tournaments, enroll in a chess class, find other chess families—and play!

### **FOLLOW YOUR CHILD'S LEAD.**

If she is destined to reach the top in chess, she will be self-motivated. You will never need to push her to study.

### **LEAVE THE COACHING TO THE COACH.**

If you do hire a coach, let him do his job, so you can do yours—parent your child.

As challenging as it is to be a chess parent, I would not trade the experience for the world!♠