

The Chess Craze and When My Nine-Year-Old Son Finally Beat Me

Shôn Ellerton, June 4, 2024

I never dreamed that chess could be so popular with so many young minds during the last few years.



Earlier this week, my nine-year-old son beat me at chess for the first time. Or was it the second time? I can't remember.

In any case, his chess-playing skills have grown astronomically as well as his performance in solving Rubik's Cubes, which he can undertake in a matter of seconds. However, it is not just him but many of his friends and classmates as well.

What is going on?

A few years ago, playing chess was deemed one of those nerdy and, somewhat, elite activities. These days, it has grown into a massive following popularised by online platforms like [chess.com](https://www.chess.com), which has captured millions of addicted chess players around the world.

Kids into chess with access to YouTube, have at their disposal, countless videos of young, funny, and cool people playing almost every variety of chess move conceivable to mankind. They play against a variety of bots at different levels testing their skills whether they can beat them or not or how fast they can do so. They make videos of playing unusual and fun games like defeating a bot with thirty queens with only one queen and a few pawns.

The variations are endless.

These days, kids are far more aware of the different types of moves along with their names than what most of us had back during our childhood, in my case, being the 80s. Most of us back then didn't really care. We just played hoping that the other side would weaken and eventually concede to a loss. We had no access to instant videos online and most of us were certainly not going to do extensive research by rummaging through books at the library to research all the different moves.

My son also goes to a chess club once a week after school in which he plays with his classmates. Once upon a time, he used to take defeat poorly, but he now analyses what he did wrong and what move he should have taken with surprising sportsmanship and maturity. Audaciously, after beating me and shaking my hand, he said that I had not developed my pieces properly. He was right, but... wow!

At home, he will continue to practice chess online and watch endless chess videos including some showing off his favourite chess idol, [Magnus Carlsen](#), a Norwegian chess grandmaster now in his thirties.

No surprise he has become so good at the game.

And I have probably got worse!

But no matter. I like to think I was part of sowing the seeds of his love of chess. I taught my son how to play chess at an early age and I never played easy either, a tactic my own father practiced with me. I always felt that making a game too easy to play is not the best strategy in progressing one's skills to winning it.

Kids have a surprising ability to absorb information at a very fast pace, especially when aired on video platforms like YouTube. Watch the difference between a YouTube video aimed for young people on how to play chess, solve a Rubik's Cube, or how to play a video game like Fortnite against an adult-oriented video on how to lay a brick wall, take apart a vintage car engine, cook up a butter chicken curry or how to migrate data from a mainframe to the Cloud. The speed of delivery for adult content is noticeably more deliberate and slower, because the older we get, the longer it takes the information to be absorbed into our minds. I generalise, of course. My father was probably an exception to the rule insofar that he managed to build anything from websites to aeroplanes from zero experience with ease and could do such things like read a thick tome of a novel in no more than two days and retain most of it. Even within his seventies.

I wonder how long his enthusiasm for chess will continue. I hope he will continue to enjoy it for some time as chess is one of those pastimes which builds strong logic and powerful intuition in the skill of thinking. There are few board games out there which rely on pure skill and utter self-accountability than chess. These days, our computers can beat the best of us in chess, the first time having been achieved by The Deep Blue computer against Garry Kasparov in 1996. Impressive as this is, it took a further twenty years for a computer to beat a grandmaster in the more complex game of *Wei Qi*, otherwise known as [Go](#).

Yes, the Japanese took the game from the Chinese in case you're wondering!

We have a *Go* board at home, but none of us have taken to it yet. I thought the [rules](#) would be fairly easy, much like playing *Othello* (similar to [Reversi](#)), but it became evident that learning how to master all the rules would take a significant undertaking. Like chess, there is no luck in this game. The other downside of *Go* is fiddling with all the black and white stones. Chess is easy to set up and easy to put away.

Today's chess craze is insatiable with its perfect combination of pure skill and gameplay with today's latest technology by connecting anyone in the world through [chess.com](#) and other online platforms. It has grown so popular and addictive that many office environments have firewalled them!

My addictive phase of chess was when I was twelve or so. It was during the early 80s and it was a far different world. I went to the public library and checked out books which recorded the moves of famous games played by grandmasters. I had a friend who was equally addicted to the game, and I remember how we used to re-enact the games from the books we checked out to see how they were played out. We recorded our own games in notebooks thinking that a permanent record would be useful in the future. It probably wouldn't be, of course, but in a funny kind of way, I wish I came across records of them now. Just for fun.

One memory which lingers is when we camped out for two to three hours in front of the doors to a cinema in Colorado premiering the much anticipated third of the Star Wars movies, *The Return of the Jedi*, back in 1983. In those days, it was first in, first served, without the ability to pre-book. This eagerly awaited movie attracted a queue of people with seemingly no end.

But we had our chess set and played without a worry in the world!