



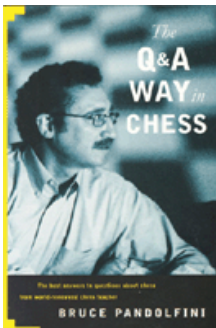
COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Too Many Teachers Can Spoil the Broth

Question I have a bright seven-year old son who loves chess, though he doesn't play in tournaments. Because of the problem-solving aspects to chess, I thought it would be good if he took chess lessons. For the past six months he has been taking lessons with a well-known teacher, who charges a lot of money. He's a good and reliable teacher and my son loves him. I can afford paying for the lessons. But I do not want to pay that much for them, not when I can get other teachers who are good enough to do an excellent job and they don't cost as much. Maybe they are that good. What do I know? I have been arranging these extra lessons on the side, without telling the first teacher, at the same time keeping the first teacher, because I do not want to confront the first teacher, who is a nice enough guy. Some of the other teachers have even questioned the first teacher's methods. They think he's overrated. I am thinking of dropping the first teacher altogether, even though my son loves him. Do you think it is possible to have several teachers teaching chess satisfactorily to one person at the same time? What should I do? **William Alpert (USA)**

Answer In life we have many teachers, starting with our parents, who aren't always good teachers, or good parents. At first we become an extension of our caretakers. They add to the structure and foundation provided by whatever hardwiring nature has bequeathed us. They teach us as best they can and love us (hopefully). As we start to get a little older, we hear other voices and come in contact with professionals who strengthen our basics and widen our horizons.

And so it goes on our educational journey, through lower and middle school, right into high school and beyond. By college time, we expect to benefit from many different voices and sources, warm or cold, primary or secondary, direct or abstract. We're able to process all that conflicting information and intellectual polarity because we've assimilated concrete structure from our parents and early teachers. Much of what follows after the first five or six years of childhood is merely building new floors and additional wings on what's already firmly established.

It's to be expected that we're able to cope with more and more influences as we acquire greater experiences, if the essential groundwork and underpinnings are there. Utmost difficulties can arise, however, when teaching children, particularly extremely young ones. If there are too many influences besieging the young, their rational edifice may become overwhelmed. Their circuits remain amorously underdeveloped, and they are predictably incapable of finding secure cognitive spaces for new ideas and evermore complex abstractions. That results in overload, with the youngster's cerebral apparatus plagued by incessant uncertainty and uselessness.

Yes, it may be perfectly okay to have a number of teachers helping your son on the same or similar material, especially if the teachers work together, are informed of what the other teachers are doing, and are united in their efforts to place the welfare of your child ahead of everything else. But if the situation is anything like what typically happens in the real world, it's probably not going to work very well at all.

More likely, at least one or more of the teachers will attempt to display their own superiority over the formative teacher, whether in obvious or subtle ways. That is particularly true when pay is involved and it's reduced to a matter of earning a living. Even when all the right concerns are there, and the parties involved endeavor to do their utmost for the child's success, the messages coming through may still seem mixed and unclear, rendering the product deleterious to the learning process.

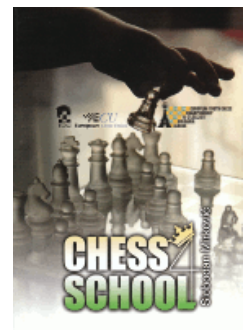
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But here, you haven't even been truthful about it. You should confront the original teacher and explain yourself. Since the first association has worked out so well, and your son indeed enjoys working with that individual, why don't you try repairing the relationship you've so terribly damaged? If he or she is charging too much for your income, or for what you deem is fair, talk it over. Perhaps with your willingness and sincere effort the teacher in question will find a way to reduce the rate so that you can live with it and your child may continue to gain. That resolution makes the most sense to me. Try to keep the first teacher by being reasonable and honest. Please tell the truth. Your son and his first teacher deserve it.

Question I am a chess player. Chess is a game. But it does not seem right to play it and never put the time into studying it. That is what has happened to me. I never get enough time to study it. Could you tell me what you think about this? Suppose I put the time into study that I would have devoted to play. Would I not become an even stronger player by going about it using my head? For me, it is like football. You can play it, but you get to know the game much better by watching analysis of it on television. I favor the head over the body. What is your opinion of what I have said? Do you think it is good? **Telemon Jeltz (Bulgaria)**

Answer I don't know what you have just said (or what you meant), but I don't think I fully agree with it. Now it's good that you are a chess player. It's good that you're endeavoring to use your head. I think it's also good that chess is a game. Nevertheless, if you want to get better at chess, you'll find it helpful to play it. Surely, chess can be studied, though this often seems debatable based on the studious efforts and eventual results of many chess players. Playing chess is the best way to size up ideas, meeting and confronting them in context. If you watched football games regularly, as you apparently do, but never played football, do you think you'd be a good football player? Wait, I just realized your answer to my question would probably be "yes."

True, chess is a much more frontal lobe activity than football, especially since chess players take fewer head shots than football players (this is true whether you mean soccer or American football, though I suspect you mean soccer). Certainly, if you somehow can find the time, you'll get something out of your chess studies, if not merely the pleasure of looking at interesting chess positions and ideas. But don't expect to get as good as you can become without engaging in actual play. It's just not going to happen. Anyway, please take care of your head.

Question My son, age six, takes chess lessons. I do not want to interfere, but occasionally I try to sit in on the lessons. I am not sure that my being there helps the lessons or causes them trouble. Do you think it is acceptable for a parent to sit in on the lesson? I enjoy watching my son learn. **James Conner (USA)**

Answer I can understand why a parent might want to sit in on chess lessons. One reason would be to check up on how the lessons are going. Another reason would be because the parent enjoys the lessons and wants to share the experience with the child, as you clearly do. Anyone watching a lesson, however, changes the lesson.

When there are observers, the teacher tends to modify his or her comments to include the audience. This reaction can occur consciously or take place unconsciously. It takes a really experienced teacher to blot out attending audiences (especially apprehensive parents or even wonderfully supportive ones) in order to speak to the child solely, as if no one were watching.

Meanwhile, it's not just the teacher who is affected. The student can't help but react to the presence of the parent. Ideally, the environment should be unfettered, with the teacher able to focus on the student completely, without the impingement of outside censors. If you want to see how the lesson is going, try to do so remotely, from an unobtrusive point in another room, as if you're doing something else. Occasionally, you can walk by for a closer look, but then make sure to move on, without lingering too long. You can see what's going on, but try to make certain not to destroy the integrity of the

student/teacher interaction.

Question I teach a little chess and sometimes give lessons at a local club. Now and then parents will attend the lessons and sometimes take part in the lessons, asking questions and occasionally advising their children during the lessons. This puts a great amount of pressure on me, and I therefore begin to say all kinds of things I might not otherwise say. I feel I am giving the lesson to the parents, not the kids. I simply wind up talking throughout the entire lesson and I do not feel like I am being effective. I prefer to give my students a bit of time to think things out. That's what chess requires. It is hard to do that with the parents breathing down my neck. Can you say something about this situation that might be helpful? **Thomas Tymes (United Kingdom)**

Answer (You might want to read the previous question, which bears somewhat on your remarks.) When I first started teaching at the Marshall Chess Club, I can remember witnessing the effects of two different types of teachers. One type would speak loudly, so the whole room could hear them. They obviously thought they had important things to say, as if they were pontificating or holding court. They thrived on parental observers and other onlookers. Their students often did terribly. You clearly are not of that type.

The other type of teacher encountered during my Marshall Chess Club days was more silent, actually giving their students a chance to think. Their students usually did better. I can remember one teacher in particular who was excellent at this. He would not encourage parents to sit in, but if they did he would go on unaffected by their immediacy. He posed many tactical and strategic problems during the sessions, and he always allowed his students sufficient space and time to think in silence, occasionally giving a slight clue, but not much more.

Such allegiance to that stoic teaching approach took enormous courage. After all, the parents were paying money for those lessons, so it would have been natural and normal to say lots of things, in an attempt to give something for the money. The first type of teacher, to be sure, would have talked nonstop. But that other type of teacher, as represented by the special teacher I just described (and I suspect you're somewhat like him), understands that students need time to think, to learn how to reason on their own. Don't be afraid to stick to your guns. Teach the way you think is right and you'll be okay. Your students will certainly be the beneficiaries.

Question I am chess teacher and I have a problem. I cannot get my adolescent students to stop moving the pieces during analysis. I have tried many things, from penalizing them when they do it wrong and rewarding them when they do it right. Is there any one suggestion you could give me to deal with this problem of students putting their hands all over the pieces? I am concerned with helping them learn how to analyze but am having trouble. How can I help them? **Mark Rosner (USA)**

Answer Don't give them any pieces. Instead, give the students sheets of diagrams and carefully go over the moves and ideas from the sheets, helping them grapple with the positions by simple variations and clear language. Start with easy advances and proceed to harder ones as the class advances. One thing you can be sure of, none of the pieces will be moved.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published below.

What is the hardest thing to get an adolescent chess student to do?

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The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a

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