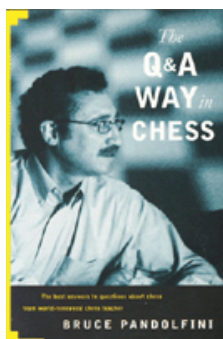




## COLUMNISTS

### The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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## Teach the Children Well

**Question** I taught myself the game of chess from an encyclopedia when I was a young boy. Now my son has picked up the game and he is progressively getting better. He is now challenging me and I am worried! Not worried about losing to him, but worried that I do not know the next step in teaching him the game. He makes solid openings, and plays a consistent and methodical middlegame, and can hold his own in the endgame. Should his next step be to learn various openings or how to defend against different openings? Is there a way to teach him how to plan farther ahead and think five moves out instead of just two or three? Should his next step be problem-solving to help strengthen his situational strategy? I am at a loss with my limited knowledge and don't know in which direction to point him now. What next step would you suggest?  
**Bob Shank (USA)**

**Answer** There's no certain way to do this, nor is there a particular regimen or order of introduction that has to be followed. Moreover, I don't know how old your son is, and his age is surely a factor. Adolescents can handle far more information than children five or six years old. Nonetheless, regardless of his age, from your description your son sounds to be a promising chess player.

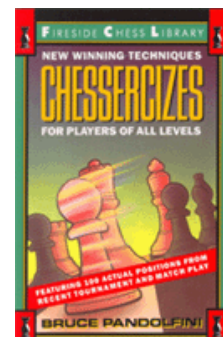
For the most part, the young at heart, whether nine or ninety-nine, prefer learning in the context of play. And that's what I'm going to recommend: that you play with him and encourage him to play other good players as often as possible. But I wouldn't stop there. I'd try to get him to analyze those games, aiming to take away at least one or two lessons from each contest. If you're not up to helping him analyze properly, you might consider engaging the aid of a chess teacher or strong player to assist the process. Whether or not you do, surely you can use software to find better moves and contingencies.

I'm not suggesting that you painstakingly analyze the games in detail. He probably won't like doing that anyway, especially when it comes to examining his losses, if he's like most kids. Just focus on a few key points per game, and as time gradually passes, his grasp of the principles and patterns of chess will continue to deepen. Learning that way, by sheer accumulation of experiences encountered naturally, as he daily tries to solve problems over the chessboard, should ultimately translate into real gains. Therefore, rather than a specific diet of chess instruction, where you approach matters formulaically, reading through one arbitrary text after the other, motivate him to play and try to understand how he could play better, relating each instructional idea to definite instances of authentic competition. No matter how well some abstract technique is explained, it can never fully rival a method worked out by oneself, or understood later by oneself, based on actual combat or direct contact.

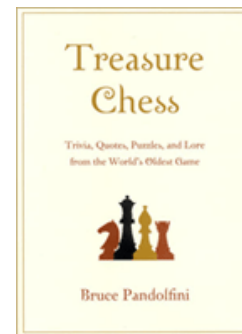
Nevertheless, if you want to supplement his study with anything definite, keep him working on tactics. The process of solving tactical problems should never stop. If he works his way through one book or block of problems, he should move on to another book or tactical group at a higher level. You should never feel as if he's finished with tactical study, no matter his degree of success. There are always tougher and tougher problems to work through, and even after achieving very proficient levels, one should still work on tactics to stay sharp and game-ready.

There are endless books for this purpose, and there are plenty of online sites, most of which you can find without much trouble. I've heard good things about the Chess Magnet School, for instance, so perhaps you might want to review what they're offering and see if it meets your son's needs and present situation. It also may help to build a library of ten or twenty source books, including several on each phase of the game, for variety and comprehensiveness. For openings, you could pick up Nick DeFirmian's *Modern Chess Openings*; for middlegames, Polgar's monstrous [Chess](#), with its five thousand plus problems,

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is certainly worth the investment; and for endgames, Reuben Fine's [\*Basic Chess Endings\*](#), as redone by Pal Benko, is a wide-body text very much in demand. Start with those three volumes, and/or a few other books like them, and you can add other volumes as you encounter ones that seem appealing, until you have a stockpile of material ever ready for use. Having [ChessBase](#) available may also serve your purposes. It provides millions of games and positions and useful ways to tap them. Overall, keep it fun and have him focus on the positive aspects of competition. If he loves what he does, it will probably love him back.

**Question** I am not a very strong player but my ten-year-old son has a rating of about 1000. He plays in scholastic tournaments and loves competing on the ICC where his rating is sometimes a little higher. Can you suggest any new teaching ideas I cannot find in books and that are not so well known, so I could help him get to be a strong player even though I am not that strong myself? I have not been too happy with everything I have read so far. **Matthew Barton (USA)**

**Answer** New teaching ideas? What's wrong with the old ones? Even so, I understand your concerns and will play along; I haven't liked everything I've read either. Let's see. You could create a running audio database, which he listens to every day for reinforcement. That is, each time some useful bit of information makes itself known to him, you, or both of you, record it. For instance, once he encounters a position from his own play where "rooks belong behind passed pawns," add it to the recording. If the next day he trades pieces when he was down significantly in material, you might add "don't trade pieces when behind." As this recording grows and grows, with ideas accruing and packed in relevant experience, its concepts should begin to settle into place automatically, without too much effort.

A comparable technique is to film his games or lessons. Then, edit that material so that only the most relevant moments remain to be viewed, the very ones on which he should be concentrating (of course, not meaning to be critical, filtered by your chessically undeveloped opinion). Seeing himself on video or DVD should make the activity incredibly more vivid and memorable for him. You could also keep an instructional diary, adding useful pointers in diagram, with minimal, though memorable, comments: add anything to trigger remembrance of the desired notion, which means each phrasing should come from him and be expressed in his language (you can help him say it, but let him have the feel of saying it for himself). And don't be afraid to draw lines and arrows on the diagrams to accentuate plans and maneuvers; as a rule, the more visual the approach, the better.

You could also play with him on the Internet, joining forces as a team, so that you could discuss games in progress and get right inside his head. To be sure, you'll want to print out and review those games afterward. This duo-play has the advantage of lessening the bad feelings arising from some defeats. If the team loses, you can place the blame on yourself (if you don't mind). If the team wins, you can emphasize his contribution, employing the manner of some of the planet's good teachers.

You could even take chess lessons yourself and have him watch, as the Suzuki music program advocates. He might be inspired to study more if he sees how much it means to you. Undeniably, the opposite reaction is also possible, so stay alert to what's happening, as you would while playing chess. I'm not certain how much of all this is "new," but while having the advantage of being gimmicky, there's a chance some of it might possibly score. As a safeguard, have your son practice some of the old ideas as well, such as playing serious chess games fairly regularly and having him analyze tactical and other types of positions in his head, every chance he gets. Those old ways have been known to work, too.

**Question** I'm a USCF "C" player who's been out of the game for awhile, but I would like to get back in. I understand at my level that tactics is probably the most important aspect of the game. Can you recommend a few books or some training software that you consider to be the best for tactical improvement?  
**Tony Wong (USA)**

**Answer** There are so many good tactical books now in print that it's really hard to say which ones you should sample, since personal taste must also play

a role. But here are a few you might find helpful, each of which I, and many other chess teachers, heartily recommend. The [Chesscafe Puzzle Book](#), by Karsten Müller, one of the best chess writers out there, is certainly excellent; [Chess School 3](#), subtitled “More Advanced Combinations,” by Alexander Mazia, offers a wonderful source of problems; and the new collection by Richard Palliser, the [Complete Chess Workout](#), has a lot of nice stuff in it. You might also explore a truly excellent tome, Igor Kmelnitsky’s delightful [Chess Exam and Training Guide](#). As an instructional manual it’s one of the finest I’ve seen in years.

But in listing these four I don’t mean to slight any other texts, which, for your specific needs, you might find more applicable. I suggest you go to an online service, such as the [USCFSales.com](#) catalog, or to the chess section in any large bookstore if you want to actually touch books before buying them, and get a sense for what’s out there. You will be surprised and pleased.

**Question** It would probably never happen, but let’s say you are approached one day by a real studious individual who plays at around 1500. They want you to recommend a list of twelve books (or even DVDs) that will help them improve with maximum efficiency. What you would choose and why? My own list is: [Logical Chess Move by Move](#), for basics; [Best Lessons of a Chess Coach](#), for calculation and basic strategy; [Simple Chess](#) (Stean), for good grounding in strategy/planning; [The Art of Attack](#), for grounding in attack; Ray Keene’s [Duels of the Mind](#) (DVD), for the thinking process of grandmasters, with some history thrown in; Danny King’s [Power Play – Pawns](#) DVD, for understanding pawn structure; [Reassess Your Chess Workbook](#), for imbalances; [How to Play Chess Endgames](#), for endgame strategy; [Silman’s Complete Endgame Course](#), for more endgames; [50 Ways to Win at Chess](#), for advanced strategy; the [Ideas Behind the Chess Openings](#), for openings; and [Capablanca’s Best Games](#), for good clean logical chess played by a world champion. **Michael Bartlett (UK)**

**Answer** Your list is certainly high quality, and I wouldn’t question any of your inclusions. Still, it’s really hard to say what should be on such an absolute roll, since we all have individual tastes and needs. Instead, I will take a different tack, and respond by telling you what students tell me. Time and again I hear them saying the same kinds of things about the same people. Without getting into specific titles, here are some of the names they keep mentioning as the chess writers they enjoy reading the most.

In alphabetical order, here are sixteen of the game’s outstanding writers: Alekhine, Botvinnik, Bronstein, Capablanca, Chernev, Euwe, Fine, Kasparov, Keene, Nimzovitch, Reinfeld, Silman, Soltis, Tal, Tarrasch, and Watson. Each one of them has at least several splendid books they’ve produced. My suggestion, if you want to investigate the subject further, is to go to the [USCFSales.com](#) catalog and check out the various titles available from these excellent writers.

**Question** I am thirty-two years old and rated (roughly) between 1075 and 1125. I currently work two jobs and have a desire to play chess at a much higher level. Considering my age and fact that I am working more than one job, what is the highest rating I can expect to obtain realistically? **Dustin Allen (USA)**

**Answer** I can’t seem to find my crystal ball, so I may have to ballpark my thinking rather than pin it down to an exact four digit number. It would help if I knew how much time you had after your jobs are done for the day and whether your brain is capable of functioning at all once your two jobs, and all other necessary concerns, are satisfied. I know my own resources would probably fail me, but you might have greater wherewithal and inner resolve to succeed. I’m going to assume you do. In that case, it seems to me that you should be able eventually to achieve 1400 or so, if everything falls into place and the laws of the universe continue to hold. Stay away from wormholes, else all bets are off.

The best answers will be published in the next column.

*How can Fide improve its present world championship cycle?*

### **Reader's Responses from Last Month**

We received many responses to the [January](#) question of the month:

*After beating Spassky in 1972, could Fischer have been saved?*

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

**Rick Massimo (USA)** writes: No. Leaving the question of whether he was mentally ill to the professionals, the arc of Fischer's life clearly suggests someone who had one goal on his life's to-do list – becoming world champion. After accomplishing that, he fairly clearly spent the rest of his life at something of a loss as to what to do next. His shenanigans regarding his 1975 defense against Karpov are the machinations of someone who doesn't want to play. You can find precedent for this in his refusal to play any more U.S. Championships. Sure, I suppose the schedules could have been longer, but was this practically possible? And couldn't he have won anyway (cf. Sousse 1967)? And even if he didn't, what is one second place among seven firsts? But no: even the chance that he would lose was not possible. Actually, to answer your question more directly – despite all the bridges he burned in his life, was there ever a shortage of people willing to save Fischer? No. Until at least 2001, he had hundreds, if not thousands, of people all over the world who were willing to help him. Who would have refused him? Who ever did?

**Dr. Richard Reich (USA)** writes: No. Mr. Fischer was highly suspicious of doctors and anyone who disagreed with him or suggested something not according to his wishes. This made him a principled fighter for better conditions for professional chess players, but often worked to his personal disadvantage. He rejected medical help for his health problems at the end of life. I do not think he could – or would – have been able to establish the long term therapeutic relationship with a mental health professional that would have been necessary. It would be very surprising to me if no one ever suggested psychiatric help to him. It is known that even he was young, senior members of the Manhattan Chess Club were concerned enough about his emotional health to explore getting him help. (The story is that they rejected it as they were concerned it might adversely affect his chess! I suspect this is apocryphal.) One cannot help someone who does not want to be helped.

**Brenan Nierman (USA)** writes: It depends on what you mean by “saved.” It also means trying to understand Bobby from a psychodynamic point of view – something that as a mental health professional I would not do without knowing the individual personally and in a clinical relationship. But with those caveats, I think that, as people interested in chess history, we can speculate, knowing that is just what these ruminations are. I think that Bobby was driven to become world champion. Once he did this, he could have tried to hold the title longer than anyone else. But this would have entailed risking defeat – and from his many instances of balking before, we can wonder both what it was that caused such hesitation, and what it was that drove him onward to overcome such hesitation and play.

An analogous situation is found in the life of Kasparov, with the difference being that it seems that Garry's mother was wholly supportive of him, while Fischer's mother sought her own place in the light. Both men, we note, grew up without a father, as did Spassky. I suspect that the differences led Bobby to become driven, paranoid, and insecure; whereas Garry seems driven and far more secure, albeit it seems that he was a bit suspicious – perhaps with reason – about baleful influences. I think it is probably too simplistic to conclude that Bobby's image of himself was such that he could not cope with the possibility of defeat. After all, after his fantastic string of victories over top-notch players, including 6-0 victories over Taimanov and Larsen, he did not fall apart when Petrosian defeated him early in their 1971 Candidate's Final match. Nor did he fall apart when Spassky had him at 0-2 in their 1972 match.

So, under certain circumstances, Bobby was quite capable of girding his loins for battle and, in the face of tremendous psychological stress, winning. But that was when he was gunning for the title. Once achieved, it becomes a different story. Was it worth risking it to overtake Lasker's record for being a long-

running world champion? We know that Bobby held a negative opinion of Lasker at one point, which he later revised. But would risking his title time and again really be worth the trouble? Worth the drive?

I recall how excited people were when Kasparov won the title. Yet, when he lost it, people were getting bored (or so it seemed) of the constant bickering in chess politics. One can certainly state that Kasparov held the attention of the world as long as he was active. But then again, aside from Karpov, Garry was constantly competing during his chess career against a ghost. The only way to prove himself as the greatest player of all time – and, let's face it, despite the claims by top players that one cannot compare players from different eras, that is precisely what was at stake – was to so dominate the field for so long that Fischer's brief flash of brilliant sunlight would be eclipsed. This Garry did.

Bobby's mission in life was to prove himself the greatest chessplayer of all time and beat the Russians in the process. He did this. Kasparov's task was to prove himself the greatest chessplayer of all time and beat the Soviet powers-that-be in the process. But in undertaking the former challenge, he had to contend – mightily – with the ghost of Bobby Fischer. Fortunately, he had the drive and mental balance to do this over a span of many years. But Bobby, having found his Ithaca, could not even muster the energy to tell us about his great odyssey. He was irretrievably lost. But the tragedy of his life was only just beginning. To paraphrase Andy Soltis, now all we have are the games.

(A number of people emailed their objections to the use of the word "saved" in last month's question. I apologize for this ill-considered choice and note that the fault was entirely mine. – BP)

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**The Q & A Way** is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **ChessCafe.com** column...

*[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)*

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