

Craig McCarthy, Head at Russell House, issues a rallying cry for children's chess clubs



It's a game of war. The objective is to shred an army of opposing forces with no mercy. This might sound like the latest console game but, in fact, is an ancient one, in which not one drop of blood is spilled, not one expletive uttered and where the combatants always shake hands at the beginning and end of the campaign.

This is chess. There are no laser-guided, multiple-warhead machine cannons at your disposal. All you need is the power of the human brain. For as little as £5 for a chess set and a couple of lessons to learn the basic moves, the young and old, girl and boy, novice and expert alike can disappear into a world where imagination replaces high definition.

The benefits of chess in developing a child's thinking skills are well documented. To win, children have to invoke strategic planning, problem solving and memory skills as they learn opening gambits and to recognise how to deal with recurring scenarios. They have to predict the numerous possible consequences of their moves and continually make critical analyses of their positions.

Moreover, children are required to concentrate on one task for lengthy periods of time; a skill that has arguably diminished as children spend more and more time in their kaleidoscopic digital worlds. Of course, chess has embraced the digital revolution and moved with the times – I still find time to use a chess app to take on players from around the world in real time.

This year, the Russell House chess club joined with the world's grandmasters in the Move for Change movement. This is where chess games begin unusually with the black pieces moving first. Chess therefore, can provide a way in for children to think about bigger issues, too.

Chess teaches children patience and persistence and, possibly the greatest gift of all, the ability to think independently. Yet when the King finally succumbs, the lessons are not over as, with the shaking of hands, each child learns either to win graciously or lose with dignity.

We currently have 37 boys and girls competing in our ladder and inter-House events and the Delancey UK Chess Challenge. This is one of the largest competitions of its kind in the world, where children compete face to face and online, on an equal footing regardless of ability. All win prizes, from badges and mascots to cash prizes for those good enough to progress from school to the regional and national stages, as we often enjoy.

So you can see that chess has been strong at Russell House this last seven years and yet chess remains niche in schools generally. Running a chess club is not difficult. Knowing the rules of the game helps, but there are lots of resources to help teachers. Children can, with a little guidance, run their own clubs and the equipment, unlike many sports, is not expensive. Chess in Schools and Communities (www.chessinschools.co.uk) is a great place to start, or I would be very happy to offer advice, being contactable through Russell House (head@russellhouse.kent.sch.uk).

So if you are a pupil, a parent or a teacher who wants your school to start a club, my advice would be to make some noise. You will not regret it and will open up a lifetime of opportunity to keep the brains of our youngsters sharp.