Chess and autism

Chess: a bridge between two worlds

Lecture Karel van Delft  London Chess and Education Conference 2014
Purposes of this lecture

- Understanding of aspects connected with chess and autism.

- Practical ideas of how to use chess for stimulating the development, empowerment and emancipation of autistic youth.
Introduction

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Chess: a bridge between two worlds

Click on the poster to see the lecture 'Chess and autism' in English.

Download English article 'Chess and autism'.

Download Spanish article 'Ajedrez y autismo'.
First article about chess and autism in Magazine Dutch chess federation KNSB
Many translations in English and Spanish
More in Spanish, just Google
Conclusions

- Chess fits autistic children and adults.

- Chess stimulates the cognitive, social, emotional and metacognitive development.

- Chess brings a bridge between two worlds.
What is autism?

- Autism is a congenital neurological disorder.
- Symptoms are: limited social skills, a need for structure, and problems with emotions, empathy, self-image, language, imaginative powers and locomotion.
- Autists have trouble internalizing sensory stimuli as a coherent whole.
- Autists often have a limited field of interest, in which they can specialize strongly.
- To cope with the complexities of the outside world, autists seek refuge in fixed habits and patterns.
- There is a spectrum of autism disorders with category classifications.
Chess is combining rules and patterns. The game fits many autists.
Needs of autistic children

- Rest, structure, obvious rules
- Safe environment
- Predictable procedures
- Clear, concrete communication
- Acceptation, empathy
Chess stimulates

- **Cognitive** development
  Thinking, reasoning

- **Metacognitive** development
  Thinking about your thinking

- **Social** development
  Contacts with others, social skills

- **Emotional** development
  Selfconfidence, pleasure
Why chess fits autists?

- Not physical
- Logical
- Safe
- Structured
- Quiet
- During game individual
What brings chess?

- Social contacts
- Cognitive challenge
- Fun
- Success experiences
- Nice hobby
With chess come all kind of skills
Trix Meurs, mother of Tom

As a mother of two autistic sons she knows autists focus.

Via this focus you can get contact with them.
This is a story about

- Tom
- Maarten
- Jaap
- Caspar
- Laurens
- Jeroen
- And many more autistic children and adults.
Understanding

- They have problems understanding the world around them.

- People around them have difficulties to understand them.

- Results: misunderstandings, confusion, fear and frustrations.
Prevalence

- Approximately one in every 100 persons has an autistic disorder.
- Boys suffer from it six times more frequently than girls.
Environment

The better their environment is geared to their needs, the more autists are able to develop their qualities.
How to recognize autism?

- Rigid behaviour, ‘strange’
- Difficult normal contact
- No eye contact
- Very sensible for sensory stimuli
- Often alone
- More difficulties playing with other kids, compared with adults
- Language often different
- Mood can change fast
- Dealing with changing circumstances is difficult
- Fear, panic attacks, depressions
- Sometimes difficulties with futilities
- Not predictable
- Pure, friendly
- Incomprehensible
Limitations youth with autistic disorder

- Social skills limited: no or a few friendships
- Communication, language
- Non-verbal communication
- Imagination
- Need for structure
- Emotions, empathy, fears
- Self-image
- Locomotion
- Internalizing sensory stimuli
- Concentration
- Physical contact threatening
- Limited field of interest
- Changing situations
No autist is the same

- Different types of autism
- Level of disorder
- Innate character
- Intelligence
- Special talents
- Upbringing
- Social circumstances differ
Strong aspects of autists

- Own logic, system thinker
- Can concentrate well on one topic
- Can work concentrated a long time
- Understands well schematical representations
- Has a strong visual memory
- Works well by himself
- Polite to others
- Reliable (agreement is agreement)
- Works well via plans and procedures
- Can reproduce many facts
- Eye for details
- Much knowledge about certain issues
With autism you can participate in a chess training and tournament.

‘Everything in the life of Laurens should be planned’, his mother says. ‘Except for chess. Then he likes to investigate.’
You can influence level of performance

Create conditions:

- Talent: innate abilities can be improved
- Circumstances: good trainer, materials
- Motivation: grows by success experiences
- Physical condition: improved by exercises
- Mental condition: created by respect, empathy
Jaap de Vries
Jaap has Asperger. Between rounds in a chess tournament, Jaap plays games on his Nintendo. This is precisely what does allow him to make contact with other children, who come to him to see what game he is playing. ‘If you share his interest, he is open for contact’, his mother Annemieke has noticed.
Maarten Beekhuis at his chess club
Quotes Maarten

- ‘I think that I like chess because I am good at it.’

- ‘I’m probably more self-involved than most people, but I like to have social contacts. My autism makes this difficult.’
Principles of emancipation and empowerment

- Everyone has limitations and disabilities
- We have to make the best of it
- If possible: together

- Speak about limitations
- Create conditions for discussion about it
- No shame
Perspective

- Autism can not be cured
- You can learn to deal with it
- There is room for development of personal qualities
- Autists and people around them can learn to deal with handicaps
- Important: recognize and accept limitations
- Talk with autistic in a normal way
Perspectives of better life quality via

- Behaviour therapy
- Psycho education
- Medical treatment
- Creating predictable circumstances

And:
- Join activities like chess to stimulate qualities
Qualifications of a trainer

- Know chess (limited level already enough)
- Empathy
- Didactical skills
- Understanding autism
- Social skills
How to develop as a trainer

- Read, talk, get experiences
- Understanding, expertise, patience
- Consistent attitude and procedures
- Offer structure and make this clear
- For example via week schedule
- Personal contact
- Work with small groups
Principles for a trainer

- Start with possibilities of autists, e.g. intelligence, eye for detail, strong memory, possibility to focus.

- Give own responsibility where possible and help where necessary.
Be practical

- Be practical if there arise difficulties.
- For example make agreement with autistic kid and group you give him a ‘time out’ if he gets very angry or panics.
- Time out is not a penalty, it is a practical solution.
- Because: if somebody has a headache he also needs some rest.
- Ask the kid why he shows this behaviour. Maybe things can be done different next time.
Tips of trainers
A lot to think about: develop routines

- Small groups, individual attention
- Unambiguous use of language
- Quiet environment
- Enough time for tasks, avoid stress
- Announce clearly what you will do
- Immediately interfere when problems arise
  - Mention wrong behaviour and explain why
  - Useless to get angry, tell what you expect
  - Clear structure in lessons and programm
  - Don’t stop fast self study (Aspergers)
  - Emotional support, explain situations
  - Check always if the kid understands what you are saying
  - Watch the situation by the eyes of a autist
Content of lessons and training

Same as with other people

- Play games
- Analyze games
- Tactics study
- Study commented games
- Various
- Computer / internet very usefull (no emotions)
Steps method: very structured method
With explication
And exercises with direct feedback
How and where can you train

- Self study
- On a club
- Via the computer and internet
- With friends and family
- With a qualified trainer
15 year old pupil, gets individual lessons, says I learned via chess:

- Perseverance
- Taking into account different things at the same time
- Knowledge and technique of chess
- More pleasure in the game
- Proud because I win more often
- Dealing with loosing a game
- Concentration on a task
- Doing research
- Discussion with another about things
- Verbalizing matters
- Self study