



Drawing by Trix Meurs

B7.5 Chess and autism

Chess is a suitable sport for many children and adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Scientific research on this subject is lacking, also on an international level. Experience indicates that chess stimulates social, emotional and cognitive development.

A 'super championship' for Jaap de Vries

'Mate', Jaap de Vries (9) announces firmly. After an attack on the enemy king, Jaap manages to score his third full point during the national chess championships for pupils in Gouda. 'My rating is rocketing sky high!', he shouts.

Jaap is not very keen on a conversation with a total stranger. But this changes if he is allowed to play a game of chess with him. Then he talks incessantly between moves. 'If I play chess, I keep learning more and more. It's a fun sport, actually.' Jaap wants to learn to play good chess. 'This is a super championship!', he says.

Jaap is suffering from Asperger's Syndrome. Because of this, he has few social contacts. In between tournament rounds, he plays games on his Nintendo. In fact, 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. 'These games look individualistic, but for Jaap they are an opportunity to make contact with other children.'



Jaap de Vries

Jaap takes in sounds much more strongly than others, says his mother. 'His brain does not filter away these background sounds.' That is why he wears custom-made earplugs when he plays chess with other children. He keeps his kinetic unrest under control with a toy snake that he can fiddle with.

Jaap plays chess every week, in the youth section of De Wijker Toren. Trainer Jan Sinnige teaches a group of four beginners. 'Jaap has a good contact with the other children of the group, but not with children from other groups of the youth section', he says.

'At the chess club he can gradually build up contacts', Jaap's mother says. 'He has no friends in the neighbourhood. At the chess club he feels at home.'

Maarten Beekhuis: contacts through chess

In the coming season, Maarten Beekhuis (26) will make his debut in the second team of Homburg Apeldoorn. He has an Elo rating of 2126. 'I've been playing chess for almost twenty years now. During a game I'm fanatical, but I don't study very hard. I think that I like chess because I'm good at it.'

Maarten suffers from the classical form of autism. After a stay of several years in the Leo Kanner House (a centre for treatment of young people with autism) in the Dutch town of Doorwerth, he is now living in a protected housing unit in Twello. There he works half-time in the public library. 'The rest of the day I'm doing everyday business like shopping and cooking. I also occupy myself with the computer, I read, and I play Scrabble.'



Maarten Beekhuis

As a chess player, Maarten has achieved some successes. He became Dutch champion with the E-team of De Schaakmaat and with the school team of the lower classes of the City Gymnasium in Apeldoorn. At one Dutch individual junior championship (under 12), he came fourth.

'I'm probably more self-involved than most people, but I like to have social contacts. My autism makes this difficult.' Autists take language literally. 'Sometimes people mean something else with what they say, and I often miss that. That makes me uncertain.'

Autism occurs in different forms. 'In any case, autism is hereditary, and there are certain symptoms – in my case, a need for structure and clarity. My perfectionism makes it difficult to separate main issues from side-issues. And new things are scary for me.'

During a chess game Maarten is in his element. 'I'm very good at focusing. Via the health institute GGNet I play indoor soccer. That's fun, but it's also hard. I am a slow thinker and I cannot size up a situation at a glance: should I pass the ball or make an action myself?'

Tom Meurs enjoys strategic thinking

Tom Meurs (17) has Asperger's. This pre-university education student has been playing chess since he was eleven. 'They needed a player for the school chess team. So I quickly learned the rules, and it was fun.' Soon he became a member of the chess club in Ermelo, and he joined the chess camp of De Schaakmaat at



Tom Meurs (left) with his trainer Merijn van Delft.

the Open Dutch Youth Championship. Tom trained with the Stichting Bevorderen Schaken Apeldoorn (Foundation for the Promotion of Chess in Apeldoorn), and now plays in the second team of Homburg Apeldoorn. His Elo rating is 2175. 'I want to cross the 2300 mark within a year. I train with IM Yochanan Afek for two hours every week, and via email with IM Tibor Karolyi, with whom I have stayed in Hungary for a week.'

Tom often doesn't understand exactly what other people mean. 'Sometimes I attach too much meaning to it.' An advantage of his Asperger's Syndrome is that he is good at concentrating. 'Especially during trainings. A disadvantage is that during a tournament I sometimes feel less at ease, which is bad for my performance.'

In recent months he has taken up boxing. 'That's a strategic sport. Taking blows, fighting back. You become self-confident, because you have to dare to attack as well. It is very much like chess.'

The nice thing about chess, Tom thinks, is that it is a very strategic game. 'It offers you full scope to apply all your understanding and your creativity. You really have to work hard; analyse, make plans, look deeper than your opponent.'

Tom has a tip for chess trainers. 'At De Schaakmaat they wanted to slow me down when I had finished Step 4 in one week. Other children finish two pages in a week, but a kid with Asperger's, who is enthusiastic, can do a lot more. Such kids should be allowed to go ahead.'

His social skills have improved a lot compared with ten years ago. 'Whether this is because of chess, I don't know. I've also learned a lot from the support of my parents.'

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. We speak of the Spectrum of Autism Disorders. Category classifications are: classical autism, MCDD (Multiple Complex Development Disorder), the Asperger's Disorder, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified).

Approximately one in every 200 persons has an autistic disorder. Boys suffer from it six times more frequently than girls. The better their environment is geared to their needs, the more autists will be able to develop their qualities.

Chess is suitable for autists

'Chess is definitely a suitable sport for autists. The rules of the game are clear, there is no physical contact, it's nice and quiet', says Heleen Kers from Apeldoorn. Via Heleen, a dozen children of De Ambelt – a school for special education – have joined the school chess club De Schakel. 'You can teach them in a normal way, but you must give them individual attention. And the teacher must use straight language.'

In Putten, the 'Foundation for Groundbreaking Talents' organizes chess lessons for young people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is done in cooperation with the local chess club PSV DoDo. Initiator Jacqueline van den Brink: 'They are often able to think very logically, and this fits in well with chess, which is a game that is very structured and surveyable. Autists are often perfectionists. When playing chess, they have a grip on what they are doing.' The experience of Poulien Knipscheer, a chess trainer and pedagogue from Rotterdam, is that as a trainer you have to express yourself very clearly, and give a lot of information. 'To autistic children who learn to play chess, it's better to explain everything in one go than to introduce the rules and their exceptions step by step.'

Chess is a good means for creating mutual contact, is the conclusion of recreational and leisure activities coordinator Wicher Struik of the Leo Kanner House. 'By joining this little club they belong somewhere, and that strengthens their identity.' Peter Hamers gives chess lessons in the Leo Kanner House as a volunteer. 'When giving chess lessons to autists, your group should be small and surveyable. You must state clearly what you are going to do during the lesson and you must stick to that. Their mastering of the game adds to their self-respect. It also makes them feel more appreciated.'

Four autistic boys between seven and twelve years old receive one-hour chess lessons from Willem van der Hulst, who is on an Early Retirement Scheme, on a weekly basis. 'The most important thing is to have patience. Now and then they are very busy and impulsive. You must tell them clearly what is expected of them. Also, you have to motivate them, as they often find it hard to take initiatives by themselves. You can see how much fun they're having. I have the impression that chess is very good for their development – intellectually, socially and emotionally. It also gives them self-confidence, as they learn to be good at something.'

Walk-in Centre InsideAut in Alkmaar has a chess club. Many people with autism like to play chess and they do it well, says professional employee Carola Zwartjes. 'It is safe and structured here. At a 'normal' club, people with autism often miss social association with other club members.'

The Australian IM Alex Wohl has trained the talented Trevor Tao in the 1990s. 'You have to explain everything as simply as possible', he says. 'You should not assume that certain knowledge is present, or that something will be understood. You have to check all the time if what you say is getting across. With many autists you can communicate really well, but it's different than with most other people.'