

Santa Claus brought him a small plastic chess set

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a boy. Much of the time he wasn't very happy. He couldn't do sports or anything else physical. He found it difficult to make friends and talk to other people. These days children like this are given labels and understanding. The latter is more helpful than the former: soup cans need labels, people need understanding. But in the olden days you were expected to conform and, if you didn't, you were bullied and abused until you did.

However, his brain worked quickly and accurately, he had a retentive memory and a good understanding of logic and structure, and was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to one of the top London schools. But there he found the work increasingly hard. He wasn't able to focus on more difficult topics and never learnt how to study. He didn't get into university and ended up at a college where he felt no connection with the other students, spending most of his time on his own in silence. As he was hopeless at interviews and found communication with strangers very difficult he didn't see how he would ever get a job or make anything of his life.

But wait. Stories that start 'Once upon a time' are supposed to have a happy ending, aren't they? And this story doesn't sound like it's going to have a happy ending.

So let's rewind a bit.

When he was ten years old Santa Claus brought him a small plastic chess set. He learnt the moves and started playing against other children at his new school the following September. About five years later, when he could beat the other boys in his form, his father took him along to the local chess club. Although he found it difficult to talk to anyone else there he was invited to play in matches against other clubs and started playing in tournaments. When he returned from college it was the summer of 1972 and chess was on the front page of all the papers. His parents' friends asked him to teach chess to their children. Membership of his chess club was growing and he was asked to captain a team. At the same time he was fortunate enough to find a job in the real world, but his passion was chess. He had found his niche, and, yes, this story did, after all, have a happy ending.

That boy, as you've probably guessed, was me. The reason I do what I do is that I'm aware from personal experience that chess can enhance and even save lives.

We hear a lot about the academic benefits of chess and many studies have attempted to measure this. All this is fine, of course, but I believe the social benefits of chess are equally important, and not something that can easily be measured.

Karel van Delft, writing about chess and autism, describes chess as a bridge between two worlds. That's exactly what it was for me: a bridge which enabled me to cross from my own internal world to the world at large.

So how can we identify and encourage children who might benefit from chess in the same way that I did?

We're looking for children who prefer mental to physical competition. Children who have problems with sports and other physical activities. Children who prefer quiet activities to loud activities. Children with autistic traits. Introverted children. Children with communication problems. Children who prefer low levels of social interaction. Children with sensory processing or sensory integration issues. Children with low self-esteem. For children like this, chess might be something very special.

We need to encourage schools and parents to identify these children, teach them the moves, and, if they enjoy the game, help them to join clubs and find chess mentors and tutors. Taking part in competitions may be a problem: many children on the autistic spectrum find it hard to deal with losses or other bad experiences, so we need to introduce them to the world of chess slowly and gently. But if we get it right we really can transform children's lives.

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