The gift of chess

MARK PETERMAN/Special to the Star

The chess club at Richardson Elementary School in Lee's Summit was born from student interest. Fifth-grader Adam Oliver concentrated during a recent game.

Game's challenge changes students

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS
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Caleb Brown has changed.

Gone is the boy who spent most of his time alone in a classroom corner playing video games in his head.

In his place is a self-assured competitor with the confidence to make friends.

Chess changed him.

"Caleb has come a really long way," said the boy's father, Jeff Brown, a self-employed Lee's Summit businessman. "I have seen a level of maturity in Caleb that I don't have words to express."

Caleb is not unique.

In recent years, chess has been built into the curriculum of schools around the country, even the world, because of its proven abilities to improve confidence, memory, concentration and problem-solving skills in children. And it works for children of just about every age and ability.

Before learning to play 18 months ago, Caleb had few friends. Other children shunned this 10-year-old special education student, who could hardly sit still five minutes let alone focus on school work, said his teacher, Chris Carpenter.

Carpenter, a special education

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teacher at Richardson Elementary School in Lee's Summit, has taught Caleb for five years. He tried all kinds of techniques, such as art and playing with building blocks, to liberate the spirit he suspected was hidden inside this soft-spoken, poker-faced boy.

At first Caleb showed some interest in drawing blocks and mystery puzzles, but it was always short-lived. "Chess was just going to be another thing I would try," Carpenter said. "I didn't know it would work."

Breaking through

Never has the game produced cheers or even wide-eyed stares of amazement from Caleb. Yet, every day since that first encounter with knights and pawns, Carpenter said, "Caleb asks me to play him a game of chess."

When they're across the table from each other, the teacher-student boundaries disappear. The two relate as equals, as competitors, as friends. Carpenter takes the opportunity to relate chess lessons to life.

Good behavior, focusing, paying attention in class are equal to winning, Carpenter tells the boy. Uncontrollable anger, ignoring the teacher and slacking off in school equal a loss.

Chess became Caleb's tool against his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

"It used to be, on a spectrum from happiness to anger, Caleb could hit either end at any given time," Carpenter said. "But now he is more centered."

Even more to Carpenter's surprise, Caleb's enthusiasm for chess triggered an interest in the game among a diverse group of Richardson students.

The 40 boys and girls became a club. Out of it emerged several state chess champions, including kindergartener Joshua Burger, 5, the youngest grade-level champion recognized by the Missouri Chess Association.

"I just wanted to find the thing that would connect with Caleb," Carpenter said. "I wanted to give him something that would bring him out of his own little world and help him to share with everyone else."

It all began one day last school year when Carpenter sat down with Caleb and placed a checkered board between them. Carpenter identified the game pieces and explained the basics.

Almost from the start Carpenter could see, ever so slightly in Caleb's eyes, that the game captured the boy's attention.

Carpenter's gift — chess — began to work on the boy.

Even his best friend, 10-year-old Adam Oliver, noticed.

"Caleb is much better now at telling people when he is angry about something instead of just storming off," Adam said. "He is better at talking to people, and asking them if they want to be his friend."

Before long, Caleb left his corner and seemed to forget about the mental video games. He moved back into a traditional classroom full time. He stayed in his seat, listened to his teacher and focused on school work.

"It's like Caleb reached an epiphany that he has more in him than he or any of us realized," Brown said. "I owe it all to Mr. Carpenter and chess."

In November, Caleb began private chess lessons and now has several tournament victories.

"I would rather play chess than any video game, even Dragon Ball Z or Gundam," Caleb said during an evening chess club practice in the school library. His most recent medal, on a red, white and blue ribbon, hung around his neck.

"Chess is a good game for your mind," Caleb said. "It really helps me focus. It's a mystery and a challenge."

Playing chess has brought him

First glance

- A teacher finds that chess unlocks the spirit of a Lee's Summit special education student.
- A schoolwide chess club is born.
- Research has found that chess helps students improve academic performance.

"It doesn't matter who you really play," Caleb said. "It matters how you play against the person. I would play anyone, but I might be a little nervous playing against Ron Luther. He's an adult — Missouri's champion."

Backed by research

Carpenter said his strategy with Caleb was more a stroke of guesswork than genius. But experts in child development said studies done as early as 1970 have shown that chess increases many skills in children.

As a result of these studies, chess has become part of the curriculum in some school districts. In New York, for example, the Manhattan Chess Club worked with the American Chess Foundation to start "Chess-in-the-Schools," where children of varying socio-economic and academic levels are taught to play the game.

Some graduates now teach the game to children with learning disabilities at a camp in Rhinebeck, N.Y.

Mike Kunin, associate director at the camp, said he has been amazed that children with serious learning, emotional and behavioral disorders can focus for long periods to play the game.

Peter Dauvergne, as a senior lecturer in the faculty of economics at the University of Sydney in Australia, wrote in a July 2000 paper that chess is "one of the most powerful educational tools available to strengthen a child's mind."

"Whatever a child's age," Dauvergne said, "chess can enhance concentration, patience and perseverance, as well as develop creativity, intuition, memory and most importantly, the ability to analyze and deduce from a set of general principles, learning to make tough decisions and solve problems flexibly."

Carpenter had never read the studies, and he is still amazed how children of varying abilities can understand such a complicated game.

"For example, I have two kids who are on the chess team who are in special education — one is gifted and one is not. One has an IQ above 150. The other student's IQ is at least 60 points below that. The one with the higher IQ can't beat the one with the lower IQ."

A champion at 5

For some of the children, chess is just fun.

Joshua Burger, the kindergartner, started playing this school year. His dad, John Burger, was a member of his college chess team.

At first, the elder Burger wondered how well Joshua really understood the game. But then he saw Joshua play in his first tournament at Pembroke Hill School in Kansas City, when he hadn't yet learned how to close a game.

Joshua played his first four games to draws. During a break, his father gave Joshua a crash course in reaching checkmate. The boy won his next match against an opponent more than twice his age.

"It's funny," his father said. "Joshua is just learning to write his alphabet. But he can take chess notes on moves he is learning — even though he still writes some letters backward and upside down.

"These kids know what they are doing. Chess is good for them. They have learned how to win."

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