# **Chess parents are pushing kids to break down: Notes from a coach**

**Source: ShilpaMehra, Child Psychologist**

Something crazy is happening in the chess world: A game that should be binding family members with fun, unhooking them from screens, proving a personality development tool is actually creating unnecessary stress, anger and disappointment. Parents rushing into [professional chess](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/blog/chess-as-hobby-or-pro-sport-primer-parents-5349023/) and becoming desperate for results is a sad reality. Regain the joy with chess, but don’t read further if you can’t handle being horrified.

Even genius cannot succeed without a certain amount of passionate hard work. Chess news continues to glitter with articles about kids in the four to 10 age-group being the next great talent around. Track the progress of these kids for up to age 15 and there are thousands of dropouts for every one child who really succeeds professionally. While there is no foolproof blueprint to follow with chess, there still is scope to improve our approach to chess as parents.

Let’s first look at some true case studies from students at my chess club:

**Case 1:** A 10-year-old showed remarkable progress and his parents were inspired to take him to a FIDE rated tournament (mainly for professionals) after two years of study, thrice-a-week 90-minute classes. The child did well and became rated. The parents hoped he would take up chess professionally. On their return, the kid, now a teenager, became slightly distracted from chess. At school and local tournaments, his parents would shout at him every time he lost. At a particular tournament, the kid’s mother completely lost her cool and hit him when he lost to a weaker adult player. The opponent had cheated in league with an arbiter. The mother didn’t believe that and blamed the kid for wasting time and money, being lazy and distracted. The boy quit chess and refused to play ever again. Not just tournaments, he refused to play chess totally. What happened?

**Case 2:** A six-year-old joined chess and discovered a lot of fun playing with kids particularly beating some seniors. He was inspired to practice at home and within six months became champion in his age-group in the city! The parents decided to travel to a state-level tournament where he did average. They returned and decided to go full throttle with a professional coach coming home. Soon the poor kid was studying daily alone with an adult. The fun of the chess classroom was gone. He was to sit with an adult, working hard with books, listening to professional instruction, much of which he didn’t understand. His father claimed he was a great chess player himself and even started teaching him techniques which were all wrong. By now the kid was bored and distracted. The pressure to perform was building up while he lost to kids he earlier beat. He quit chess totally. What happened?

**Case 3:** This mother introduced her seven-year-old to chess. After just about a year of only hobby classes twice a week she decided to test waters. Despite being alerted by the coaches that the kid was not prepared for national or international professional competition, she insisted upon professional coaching. However, she had the kid also scheduled in various other activities from morning to night including dance, singing, swimming, etc. The child would come to chess class with no homework done, tired and begging to be allowed to sleep. She ignored all alerts that this wouldn’t work. She even started claiming within the family that her kid was a chess prodigy and would take him to an international tournament. Eventually she did so with no proper practice or home study despite repeated alert by the coaches. The kid began to lose from Round 1. From the second round onwards, while she would herself go to the hotel gym, she would hook her child via [Skype](https://indianexpress.com/about/skype/) to a coach and insist that the child be helped online. No fee was to be paid either. The boy lost all his games. His tears wouldn’t stop. On his return, the boy quit chess. What happened?

**Case 5:** Another mother started blaming the coach and pouring out her personal problems every time her child would lose. She lied to her husband about her child’s progress so she herself could travel on the pretext of chess tournaments and escape from in-laws. She changed several chess coaches with some just spinning off money and others refusing to teach. The kid continues to play at local level and has not made much of the initial talent shown. The kid has also fallen into bad company and learned to cheat along with indulging into betting. What happened?

**Case 6:** The father of a talented boy decided to hold tournaments himself and earn off it. But soon he realised he was providing a platform for other kids as well to grow at chess. He stopped everything and shifted cities to South India pouring in lakhs of rupees and insulting coaches as now he was a big organiser himself. The boy has quit chess. What happened?

**Case 7:** Screen addiction and continuous online playing forced a set of parents to seek psychiatric help. The kid was himself not willing to do anything but chess as he found it an escape route. It was best for him to quit chess. What happened?

Not all stories are as stark as these. But I chose them to really sound an alert.

Let’s summarise. What doesn’t work: Need for showing off a trophy kid, lack of faith in professional coaches, trying to wriggle out of family circumstances, hoping to buy knowledge without hard work, not willing to work with a kid at home or not having the time to do so, pouring endless money into books and resources without planning, and desperation to succeed etc.

What works? If you’re a chess parent, avoid the listed traps. Here’s a checklist to actually go forward with chess if you’re not sufficiently frightened already!

– Let your child start chess for fun and personality development. Consider professional coaching only after one year and stick to it as long as your kid enjoys it. Be realistic about hard work and results.

– Evaluate your family environment, your finances, the interest of the child and your short-term goals. You cannot buy success. Period.

– How much time do you have as an individual parent to put into helping the child do his homework, travel with him, be his manager? Or, you wish to hire a full-time coach that may include travelling to tournaments with your kid. Be respectful of the coach, pay his fees in keeping with Indian traditions of the ‘*guru-shishya*’ legacy and stick to his advice for at least two years. If you don’t have faith in a coach, don’t work with him professionally at all.

– The fitness of a growing child is important as well considering chess training is a sedentary activity. Can he go for sports? Can he do physical exercise? What are his sleeping and eating habits particularly during the tournament. But then you suddenly can’t improve sleeping and eating habits overnight. You need to make that a part of life throughout the growing age in any case.

– Your reaction towards losses and wins. Wins don’t mean that a child needs to be loved more and losses don’t mean that the child feels unloved. The important factor is to see if your child enjoys the game and that is what you have to encourage him towards. If he loses the game, it’s okay. Just tell him to understand his problems, discuss them with you and his coach and then try afresh in a better way in the next game.

– If he wins, you must encourage him to build upon it and not become overconfident. He has to still analyse the game and still look at his weaknesses and hope to improve! All this can happen only if a child truly feels joyous about chess. So, begin by inculcating the love of chess not the love of results.

– Don’t forget to check how much screen time is truly required. You can’t avoid it totally with tech advancements so much a part of professional chess training these days, but can definitely ration it.

– Steer clear of politics and commercial short-term gimmicks offered in terms of books, software and coaching. Go slow with quality scoring over quantity. Unfortunately, like in most fields, there is plenty of commercialisation and unhelpful stuff happening around. There are people who will give you the wrong advice. And, there are people who will completely pull you down by demoralising you. Some will try to use your child’s success for their advantage or, set you back with wrong tips to get their kid ahead. This actually happens in all walks of life not just chess. Not all advice is with a demonic intent, but each child’s journey is individual. What may not work for one kid, could do wonders for another. You have to find an inner fulcrum of morality, balance and sanity with intelligence for the individual chess journey of your kid. Don’t compare.

– Don’t get blown down by the high pressure tournament environment at professional events. It gets as tense as a boxing match, probably worse. You have to help your kid toughen up not broken down. Take vacations from chess and bite-size stress events.

In the end, it won’t matter if your child became a [Grandmaster](https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/everyday-explainers/who-is-a-chess-grandmaster-7787023/) or not. What is most important is that you give him a childhood where he enjoyed the game of chess, met new people, made intelligent friends, travelled, imbibed life skills from chess like understanding the value of time management, discipline, respect for fellow human beings, importance of hard work etc.

Whether your child becomes a chess professional or not, don’t miss out on the personality development that chess can help with. Allow him to live chess that he can enjoy in his twilight years when you’re long gone. Create fantastic memories with chess. Your kid is not a circus animal on the chess stage. Give the gift of chess, not the stress.