

Talking to your child about chess

Your child does not need you to know chess. They need somebody to be interested. These are the ten things worth saying, and the three worth avoiding, taken straight out of how sessions are run.

TEN THINGS WORTH SAYING

1 “Show me what you learned today.”

Explaining a move out loud is the single most useful thing a child can do after a session. It is also the part that transfers to everything else they have to justify.

2 “Why did you go there?”

Not a challenge, a genuine question. Even a shaky answer means they had a reason, which is the whole skill.

3 “What did you think they were going to do?”

Children start out only looking at their own plan. This is the question that gets them looking at the other side of the board.

4 “Can you teach me?”

Being the one who knows is enormously motivating for a seven year old, and teaching something is how you find out whether you understand it.

5 “That was a hard one to lose.”

Naming the feeling and then moving on is more useful than either ignoring it or making a fuss of it.

6 “Which piece is your favourite this week?”

Low-stakes, easy to answer, and it usually opens up what they have been working on.

7 “Do you want to play, or do you want to show me something?”

Some evenings they want a game and some evenings they do not. Both are fine, and asking prevents chess from becoming homework.

8 “Take your time. There is no rush.”

Nearly every beginner's mistake comes from moving too fast. Modelling patience is worth more than any advice about the position.

9 “What would you do differently?”

After a loss, this turns the game into information instead of a verdict.

10 “I do not know either. Shall we find out?”

Being honestly stuck alongside your child is a good look, and it takes all the pressure off you knowing the rules.

Things to try, and things to skip

Three worth avoiding

- **"Are you winning?"** It turns a forty minute session into a single yes or no, and most of the time the answer is no.
- **"No, do that one instead."** Taking the decision away removes the only part that was doing any work. A question almost always beats an instruction.
- **"You are so clever at this."** Praise for effort survives a bad week. Praise for being clever does not, and a child who loses then has to conclude something unhelpful about themselves.

At the kitchen table

- **Play with fewer pieces.** A king and two pawns each is a real game and it finishes in five minutes. Full games with a beginner tend to sprawl until somebody loses interest.
- **Let them win, sometimes, without saying so.** Losing every game to an adult is not a lesson, it is a reason to stop. Winning some of them is what keeps a six year old at the table.
- **Ten minutes beats an hour.** Short and often is how anybody gets better at anything. A long Sunday session usually ends badly for everyone.
- **Let them set the board up.** Queen on her own colour. It is a small job, it is theirs, and it is one more thing they know that you might not.