



# CHESS FOR FREEDOM

Online Conference & Demo Chess Tournament 11 May 2021



# Chess for Life

A program and research project for at-risk youth and  
prison inmates in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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# Chess for Life program

- **Origins:**

- In September 2016, Judge Derek Redman, Chief Judge Provincial Court of Alberta, sentenced a youth to basketball practice.
- The youth had no priors. During the trial, Judge Redman found out the youth enjoyed basketball, and sentenced him to 30 minutes of basketball practice per day.
- Dr. Lance Grigg read about the case in a national newspaper, and contacted Judge Redman to discuss the possibility of using chess as an alternate sentencing measure for youth involved in the criminal justice system.
- Judge Redman liked the idea, and asked for some research on it.



- In doing the research, I found out about a number of people around the world doing excellent things with chess and those involved in the criminal justice system:
  - Orrin Hudson at besomeone.org,
  - Carl Portman with prisons in the UK,
  - Maurice Ashley with the District attorney's office in New York.
- I also found interesting research on the role of chess in a number of related areas:
  - executive function,
  - learning disabilities,
  - addiction recovery, etc.
- So, I got back to Judge Redman with the information. He liked it, and the Chess for Life program began as a six month pilot project in January 2017.



- The pilot began with a small group of five-seven youth ranging in ages from 14-17 years old. They were referred to the program by youth Crown prosecutors at Alberta Justice. Youth were required to complete 25 hours of chess instruction as part of their probation.
- The youth came to the University of Lethbridge every Friday afternoon from 1:00-3:00PM; some stayed longer and others, arrived early.
- Upon entering the program, youth were given a tournament-style chess set and a carrying bag.
- At each session youth were provided with bags of chips, pizza, sandwiches, juice boxes, and a variety of candies (Starbursts are very popular).



- In the classroom, a number of things were prepared in advance:
  - a demo-board with a chess problem was set up,
  - a live tournament was projected onto a screen in the front of the room,
  - chess boards were set up with clocks on hand,
  - food was set out for youth on a separate, large, table.
- When the youth were first brought to the university, a probation officer came along, and would introduce them to the Chess for Life team. We welcomed them, and gave them a new chess set. The youth would take the set out of the box, and set it up.
  - Some youth knew the basics so they'd set the board up themselves.
  - Those who didn't, would set it up with a team member.
- **Note:** These small details are important for creating a supportive environment.



- Depending on skill levels, team members would sit down with the youth and play chess.
- Those learning chess would begin with simpler games that gradually introduced the pieces: pawn wars, lonely knights, roaming rooks, etc.
  - Notably, regardless of skill levels, many youth enjoyed playing pawn wars. One game I had with a youth lasted for 35 minutes.
- At around 3:00 or 3:30, a case worker or probation officer would come back and take them home.
  - Eventually, a number of youth began arriving and leaving on their own.



- At the end of the six month pilot period, the program was reviewed.
- Judge Redman, a senior administrator at Alberta Justice, a probation officer and myself sat down, and explored the program's strengths and weaknesses.
- Input from youth was also provided through the probation officers.
- We concluded the program was a benefit for the youth.
- Program strengths included:
  - the university atmosphere itself; very positive, supportive and different from what they're used to,
  - a feeling of safety and acceptance; youth didn't feel judged,
  - snacks (food always works well),
  - youth appreciated owning a nice chess set.
- Program weaknesses: transportation to the university (for only a few)



- Judge Redman made a formal application to register Chess for Life with Alberta Justice as an official, referral program.
  - This gave judges and youth crown prosecutors an official capacity to refer youth to the program for 25 hours of instruction at the University of Lethbridge.
  - On January 1, 2018, Chess for Life became an official, ongoing referral program across Alberta.



- The Chess for Life program expanded to include new team members:
  - Josh Markle (PhD candidate)
  - Riley Kostek (Masters; Neuroscience in Education candidate)
  - Mohamad Harb (Masters in Health Sciences candidate)
- While being active chess players, the team's major strength is its focus on using chess as a pedagogical tool to help youth build hopeful, flourishing futures.
- Since 2018, over 50 youth have completed the program at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada.



# Research project on Chess for Life program

- In September 2018, the Chess for Life team decided to do some research on the program.
- Once again, the team expanded to include researchers:
  - Dr. Monique Sedgwick
  - Dr. Jeffery MacCormack
- Under the direction of Dr. Sedgwick, the Chess for life team designed an **ongoing, qualitative** research project focused on **participant's** and **stakeholder's perspectives**.



## Key objectives of the Study:

- The **first** objective is to give **voice** to the youth involved in the criminal justice system.
  - We hoped that through hearing their experiences with alternative criminal sentencing, people who work (i.e. judges, probation officers, social workers, and teachers) and/or live with these youth will develop deeper insights into how to best respond to them on a regular basis.
- The **second** objective of the study is to provide **empirical evidence** that will inform future discussions about the benefit of alternate sentencing.
  - In turn, this may lead to important policy development regarding intervention programs for youth and adults involved in the criminal justice system.



- **Research questions:**

1. How do youth involved with alternative criminal sentencing view themselves and their life choices while learning chess, as represented through their experiences?

- 1. Related questions:**

1. Do executive function skills improve following a 25 hour chess instruction intervention? (inhibitor control, working memory and cognitive flexibility).
2. How do key stakeholders see the value of the Chess for Life program?
  1. This research question is focussed on getting input from the support networks for youth involved in the criminal justice system: probation officers, judges, crown prosecutors, parents, guardians, case workers, etc.



## • **Methodology:**

- An ethnographic study producing qualitative data designed to help researchers understand participants' experiences.
- Qualitative data was collected primarily through digitally recorded in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews.
  - Group interviews of 2 or more may occur in 2022/2023.
- After 25 hours of chess instruction, interviews were conducted with seven youth, two probation officers, two case workers and one parent .
  - The interviews were conducted in a mutually agreeable place and convenient time.



- **Interview questions were designed to gather:**

- Personal, demographic information (youth)
  - age, birthplace, current school attending and residence, family background, habits, job information, brief legal history, interests, hobbies, etc.
- Chess-related information: (youth)
  - chess history (experienced/inexperienced), level of expertise, perspectives on the value of chess, etc.
- Impressions of the Chess for Life program: (all participants)
  - thoughts/reflections on the program, comments about its location (University of Lethbridge), general impressions of the team and its mode of delivery, notes about the quality of food/snacks, suggestions as to how to improve the program, etc.
- Please note: the interview questions were **ethnographic** in nature in order to best hear the voices of all participants.



- **Preliminary findings: (very preliminary)**
- **Probation officers, case workers and parent:**
  - There was positive feedback about the Chess for Life program as per transcribed interviews:
    - **Parent:** She was very grateful for the program. Among other things, commenting that her child was more patient at home; interacting more respectfully with siblings.
    - **Probation Officers and case workers:**
      - They felt the youth were accepted; not judged.
      - There was much appreciation for the respectful, engaging atmosphere of the university setting.
      - They had opportunities to build more positive relationships with the youth.



- Often, people felt it was less difficult to get youth doing their hours in Chess for Life than elsewhere.
  - Probation officers and case workers would explain the rationale for the program in a way that was more instructive than punitive. One remarked that after having explained the reasoning for the program, getting buy-in from youth seemed easier.
- **Probation Officer comment:** “I-I think it’s (Chess for Life) fantastic, like to have this consistent place that these kids can go to –to not only play chess and to do something but to feel like they’re learning, they’re getting good at something right, like so these kids are feeling like they’re developing a bit more of an understanding for something they see as a very difficult game...So it’s (Chess for Life) really, it’s been a really positive experience and something that’s been extremely useful for us within the system.”



- **The youth referred to 25 hours of Chess for Life:**

- Specific comments during interviews include statements such as:
  - “It’s helping my patience.”
  - “It’s good here...just interacting you know, just playing chess. I didn’t really know to play chess before I came here actually.”
  - “Just coming here and like interact with nice people you know come and play some chess, lots of it is pretty cool.”
  - “I get my hours in just by playing chess and chilling--it’s good...It’s productive.”
  - “There’s bad choices and good choices in chess...I learn about choices.”
  - “It’s (Chess for life) kind of peaceful and respectful and kind of nice...it’s just so peaceful cause when I go home you know my parents are how do I say, rebuttal-ish...I have to deal with you know, arguments.”



- A sibling of a youth in the program commented:
  - “Uh, he doesn’t sleep in as much..and he started actually going to school now.”
  - “...he’s been having more patience now.”
- “You’re able to come here (Chess for Life) and get your stress and your pressure and all that outside bullshit and it all fades away even for just the hour I’m here and I’m able to reciprocate and relate to some kids that I think can relate to me.”
- “It’s (chess) helping me be able to process in conflict situations, like slowly and be able to kind of get a good understanding of things that are going on...it (chess) makes me be able to calm down and think a bit more clearly...and process a lot better instead of getting my emotions kind of drawn to whatever I’m thinking.’



- **General, preliminary interpretations of comments made by youth:**
  - Youth *felt accepted and respected* at Chess for Life sessions; not judged.
  - Many appreciated the *calm atmosphere* of each session.
  - They appreciated the *regularity* of the program; they knew that every Friday from 1:00-3:00 there would be Chess for Life at the University of Lethbridge.
    - For many youth, this was an important consistency in their lives. Often, there was little order in their lives. The routine offered something solid and reliable in their daily routine.



- Youth commented that at Chess for Life, they feel they can exercise **control** over their lives. They get to make some of their own choices.
- They enjoyed learning about chess, and playing the sport with caring adults.
  - Many commented on how the adults at each session were patient.
- Youth appreciated having *food* during the sessions. For many, it may be their only meal of the day.
- **Important note:**
  - **The small sample size of this project prohibits any generalization to larger populations.**
  - **The study wanted to hear the voices of participants. As an ethnographic study, broad claims about the effect of chess on larger groups is beyond its scope. That requires further research.**



- **Program expansion and ongoing research:**

- Re-launch of Chess for Life will occur in late September, 2021.
  - At the University of Lethbridge, youth will again be referred to 25 hours of chess instruction.
  - At the Lethbridge Correctional Centre, Chess for Life will begin offering chess instruction to inmates.
- Research into the program will resume after youth and inmates have received 25 hours of chess instruction.
  - A second round of semi-structured interviews will occur with subsequent transcription and analysis.



- Additionally, the research team will begin using constructs basic to executive function and hope psychology to interpret qualitative data.
  - In terms of hope theory, we'll be looking for evidence of goal identification, pathways thinking and the ability to identify and think through obstacles.



- Just recently, the team has begun exploring a collaborative research possibility involving:
  - the newly created Alberta *Drug Courts*,
  - chess therapy,
  - neuroscience of addictions (University of Lethbridge, Neuroscience)
    - Prof. Sabine Vollstadt-Klein has done/is doing promising research in this area.
- In terms of attrition, the Chess for Life team and Alberta Justice will be encouraging suitable participants who complete the program to take an active role in its ongoing delivery.
  - This can empower those who have completed the program with an opportunity to take a positive leadership role in the community.



*Thank  
you*



