Low-Cost Workouts For Young Minds
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"CHESS is like having psychic powers, because I look deep into the game and figure out what my opponent is going to do before he does it," said Wesley Yu, a pint-sized scholastic chess champion from Seattle.

"Chess is the best!" he added, and his parents concurred. His mother, Yuwei Feng, said the game had helped Wesley, an energetic 7-year-old, to focus and learn to face difficulty without giving up.

Parents often disagree with their children over how many hours they can spend playing video games or whether to use their allowance to enhance their Pokemon card collection. But a when a child takes up chess as a hobby, many parents are excited.

"Scholastic chess is experiencing a real resurgence," said Jerry Nash, scholastic director of the U.S. Chess Federation in Crossville, Tenn. The national organization counts 45,000 children 18 and under in its membership rolls and played host to 5,300 children at the Super Nationals tournament last year. "And that's just the tip of the iceberg," Mr. Nash said, "when it comes to kids playing chess."

Like many activities for children, chess brings an associated cost, but it can be significantly lower than that of other popular pastimes. Families need not buy expensive protective gear or uniforms or join private clubs, and unless their children are serious players, they do not have to travel out of town. A good-quality chess set can be had for $20 and last a lifetime. Fees to enter local scholastic tournaments usually run just $15 to $20, and membership in an after-school chess team is usually reasonably priced. Compared with hobbies like ice skating, ballet, squash, golf or the piano, chess can be practically free.

And chess offers a wealth of benefits, from the social to the intellectual. Chess can be a bridge between people, said Susan Polgar, a former women's world champion who lives in New York and promotes chess-playing for girls, among other activities for school-age youngsters. "Children can play their parents, their grandparents," she said. "Whether they are 5 or 95, fat, thin, sick, well -- any race or religion can sit down to a game of chess."

Chess combines strategy, math and logic in a game with infinite possibilities. "It's perceived as a smart person's game, so parents like their kids to play chess," said Rourke O'Brien, president of America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization in Kirkland, Wash., that trains teachers in how to bring chess into the classroom.

Several studies have shown the educational benefits of chess. "We also have plenty of anecdotal evidence from parents and teachers that chess has helped their students develop higher-level thinking skills and perform better in school," Mr. O'Brien said.

The reasons for improved schoolwork may include some psychological ones. When children start to play chess at school, Mr. O'Brien said, the game's "intellectual brand" translates to their self-image and how others think of them. For example, "a child who wasn't that engaged in school," he said, "can re-enter the scholastic scene thinking: 'Hey, I can win at chess, I'm smart.' "

The game can also offer larger lessons. "Chess is like life itself," Ms. Polgar, the former champion, said. Students can learn to think ahead, weigh their options and find a best choice. "And they learn it all in a playful way," she
added.

Of course, parents can spend more so that their children can go beyond the chess basics. Private coaches, who may charge $30 to $200 an hour, can bolster a student's game. High-end digital chess clocks can cost $100. And fancy chess sets, or a collection of them, can cost a king's ransom.

Some families pay travel and hotel costs to play in local, regional, national and -- for elite players -- international tournaments. A local Saturday tournament season can cost families $250 a month, including entry fees and travel expenses. Larger regional tournaments like the New York State Scholastic Chess Championships charge higher entrance fees -- $40 to $65, depending on when players sign up -- and may require overnight accommodations. A trip to one of the two annual national scholastic tournaments requires a four-night stay; it could cost $1,500 for a parent and child, including air fare, hotel and meals. Some families use these tournaments as jumping-off points for sightseeing in the area.

International tournaments are also available for young players. Chess for Peace, an organization based in Lindsborg, Kan., offers a $1,600 trip for chess players of any level, ages 10 to 18, to travel from New York to Moscow to play their counterparts.

Elena Donaldson, a grandmaster from Russia who runs chess camps, clinics and tournaments in Seattle, says of the experience of competition: "Students learn to handle pressure and how to lose or win a game gracefully, and to respect the opponent."

Eddie Strong, an 11-year-old teammate of Wesley's at the Lowell School in Seattle, said, "A lot of my friends win trophies for sports, but I'm better at mental games, so this is how I can win trophies." Lowell, a public elementary school, has more than 100 children in its chess club, and the school's head coach, Elliott Neff, recently opened a chess center nearby because there was so much demand for chess instruction and tournaments in the area. Mr. Neff coached last year's national championship scholastic team for kindergarten through fifth grade.

Ms. Donaldson says that children can reach a high level of play and win tournament trophies without private coaches, but that they do need to work at home. Parents can search the Internet for resources and read chess books along with their children.

A gold medal at the World Youth Chess Championship will not give your child the million-dollar television endorsement package of an Olympic skater, or put his face on a Wheaties box. But some colleges, like the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of Connecticut School of Engineering, offer scholarships to top high school chess players.

The University of Maryland in Baltimore offers chess scholarships that range all the way up to full tuition along with $15,000 a year for living expenses for outstanding players.

"We don't have a football team and we're a research-heavy school, so we give chess scholarships to attract smart students," said Dr. Alan T. Sherman, director of the university's chess program. One student, Alexander Onischuk, who has the nickname "the Invincible," won the U.S. Chess Championship in San Diego in March.

THIS spring, the game may make a bigger splash with the public. Following on the heels of television's "Celebrity Poker" and "Dancing With the Stars," ESPN has signed a deal to produce a televised celebrity chess tournament featuring Woody Harrelson, Wesley Snipes and others. "This is a charity tournament, but we hope to grow televised chess with sponsors and prize money," said Giovanni James, who is producing the show with Penny Marshall.

Like many childhood hobbies, however, chess can fall out of favor with mercurial young minds. Ms. Donaldson's son started playing chess at the age of 4 and, last year, at 8, took second place in the national scholastic tournament for third graders. This year he dropped competitive chess in favor of tennis.

"It is so much more difficult and more expensive to be a tennis mom -- but I am happy to support him," said his mother, the grandmaster. "But also, I think one day he will return to chess."

Photo: Wesley Yu, 7, a second grader at the Lowell School in Seattle and a competitive chess player, during an after-school match. (Photo by Kevin P. Casey for The New York Times)