

Checking the Competition

Winning games
and snagging
trophies began
to overshadow
Ty's love of chess.

by joanna nesbit
photographs by julia kuskin

Ty's first chess tournament was my idea. My intentions were innocent enough: to have our 7-year-old meet kids who love chess as much as he does. And Ty, who's competitive by nature, thought it might be fun too.

Normally a chatty child, Ty walked into the large room filled with cafeteria tables and mingling families and slipped his hand into mine. He stood silent, watching.

My husband Curt and I helped Ty find his chessboard when the first game was announced. Looking small and unsure, he settled across from his opponent. "Just have fun, Ty,"

I whispered. He gave me a pained smile and a little wave.

My son sat dutifully waiting to play tournament chess, despite an obvious case of the jitters. "I hope he has fun," Curt said. We also hoped he'd win at least one game. Ty wound up winning two and tying another.

Ty loves games. He discovered chess at 4. As I taught his 6-year-old sister the moves at the dining table, he hovered next to me. "Can I play?" So I taught him the moves too.

"Let's play chess," he'd say. Every day. Several times a day. He loved the shapes of the pieces, the soldierly ►►



With the help of psychologist Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, we came up with a few tips:

- **Praise effort**—persistence, strategy, and hard work—instead of innate abilities. Praising talent or intelligence can make losing harder.
- **Mix up activities.** Try team and individual interests.
- **Avoid overpraising** so performance isn't about pleasing a parent.
- **Show that mistakes are part of learning.** And point out that athletes choose to compete with better athletes to learn new skills.
- **Talk about a disappointing outcome,** but don't try to fix it.
- **Celebrate effort with an after-game treat.** Rewarding only victories focuses on the game's outcome, not the pleasure of playing.



march of pawns across the board. By first grade, his dad was teaching Ty strategy out of books. Ultimately it was the strategy of the game he grew to love the most.

After his first-tournament jitters, Ty forgot to be nervous. "When's the next tournament?" A trophy had been gravy—awarded for sportsmanship because Ty continued to play after his opponent resigned and then came back.

But that trophy set the stage for entirely different behavior. As Ty went to more tournaments, won more games, and earned more trophies, he began to strut. Obsessed with his chess rating, he pestered us to check his rating online after each tournament. "Did you know my rating is already 760 and I've only been to four tournaments?" he announced to a coach he didn't know. Oh dear.

At home, we reminded him that success comes from hard work. But when he beat someone with a higher rating, he'd spend the rest of the day speculating about his new rating. When he lost, and he did, he'd worry about how much it might drop. If he thought he might not earn a trophy, he'd go into a funk that clouded the rest of the day.

When had winning and trophies become everything? "He's young yet," another chess parent reminded us. "He'll outgrow it."

I began reading books about kids and competition. Maybe for Ty, winning was about holding on to his budding identity as a good chess player. One night Ty said he felt pressure from schoolmates when he brought a trophy to school to share. "Kids think I'm the best, Mom, and I'm not," he said, almost in tears.

According to the books, kids become more performance conscious around 7. Whether they use that awareness to measure and define themselves ►

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or to more actively learn makes a difference. If Ty's focus on winning was any indication, he was doing some heavy-duty defining. Was he afraid of disappointing us and his schoolmates, or himself?

I reminded Ty that win or lose, we love him, that we're always proud of his hard work. And we made a point of complimenting his effort during tough games. Instead of asking, "Did you win?" after a match, we said, "Tell us about the game," which elicited such vivid descriptions as, "Well, I couldn't promote my pawn and he almost skewered my queen with his bishop, but then he forked me with his knight." Um, okay. Sometimes he'd even forget to mention who won.

We talked about winning and losing—that both are important to learning. By the end of Ty's second chess season, his rating obsession was fading. He realized that even the top players lose. "Mom, did you know Collin lost his first game to a much lower-rated player?" No one thought less of Collin. "Even the best kids lose, don't they?"

After watching his sister's soccer games, Ty gave soccer a try. At his first game, his team welcomed him and parents cheered. No one talked about the score at the end of the game and Ty was beaming. Playing with a team (and a low-key coach), he experienced winning and losing without sole responsibility for the outcome.

Ty seems to be outgrowing his need to win, just as our friend predicted. Now 8, his losses—on the board or on the field—don't ruin his day, and he no longer struts. He played his dad in chess for the first time in months. "He crushed me," my husband reported. Not that we're keeping track. ●●

The Emerging Competitive Streak

Around early school age, children no longer look only to their parents for approval. "They're figuring out who they are compared to others, how they fit in, what they're good at, what they're less good at," says Linda Mayes, child psychiatrist at Yale Child Study Center.

As a child nears adolescence, her capacity for reflection and self-appraisal increases, says Mayes. She begins to have a more sophisticated sense of future—"I didn't win this time, but if I work hard, I may win next time." She understands that losing one game doesn't mean she's a failure—a sign that she's developing a more integrated sense of self.



Currently on the injured list, Joanna Nesbit (far right, with Ty, 8, Curt, and Leah, 11) hopes to return to Ultimate Frisbee competition in spring 2009. There are no trophies, but they do keep score.

