

# Teaching Black Kids Chess to Relieve Stress

*Ancient strategy game being used to teach life strategies to urban youth*

By **Crusader** -

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*RALPH JONES DEVELOPED software to teach chess in a fun format. He and several other friends started a business to instruct the youth in mastering chess while providing critical thinking and analytical skills for chess and other life situations. Standing (l-r) is Vincent Walker and Doug Jackson*

In the basement at the St. Sabina Ark in the Gresham community, 20 young people are sitting in front of computer monitors playing a game. But it's not modern video games; they are learning how to play chess. As more and more positive ideas are being introduced in the community to combat violence, a group of Black men are using the game of chess to teach young people how to think through life's challenges.

It all started in 2013 for Doug Jackson, Ralph Jones, Andre Dixon and Vincent Walker. They created Youth Development Systems Inc. Jones who has a background in software development and accounting, developed the Fun with Chess Learning System™ which teaches chess in a fun and strategically induced format. Jackson's background includes 23 years selling instructional technology and Dixon was a school teacher for several decades in the Chicago Public Schools. This year alone the group has taught 60 kids the game and they are looking to expand the program to other park districts, schools and after school programs. Jones says not everyone can afford to pay a chess master \$50 an hour to teach their kids how to play.

**By J. Coyden Palmer**

STUDENTS LEARN THE game of chess using computers at the St. Sabina Ark, which provides an outlet from violence as well as encouraging critical thinking.

For the retired teacher Dixon, he said it can be a challenge to keep kids focused in this "me-first" instant gratification society. But he said they use the push-button generation to their advantage by teaching them the game in a new way, not on a traditional chess board.

"They all know how to use a computer. We're bringing what we have to a place where they are already used to being," Dixon explained. "With the chess board, they have to find someone else in their location to play with. With the computer they can play people who are not physically with them. They can play against kids in other neighborhoods where their parents might not let them go."

Jackson said that is a practical part of using the program. He said the social dynamic of chess bringing kids together is something that is needed and there needs to be more creative ways to get youth involved in positive activities.



*STUDENTS LEARN THE game of chess using computers at the St. Sabina Ark, which provides an outlet from violence as well as thinking skills through a program developed by Youth Development Systems, Inc.*

"As we move forward with technology and look more at 20th Century work skills, a few things are important; like the ability to collaborate," said Jackson. "They can learn and play with kids who are neighborhoods over, cities over and even other countries. Another thing that chess does that you don't get in other academic areas...is we are able to employ the students' competitive nature. Yes, you can compete in math with who gets the best score, but with chess they get to compete one on one and kids like that. In chess training we take down the physical barriers that come with physical sports of he's taller and faster than me or he's a boy and I'm a girl. Here students are able to compete on a level playing field with their minds."

YOUTH FROM EIGHT years old to high school age are learning chess in an after school program at the St. Sabina Ark. The children quickly learn how to play because it is on a computer, which is how many play video games.



For Walker, he said his teaching style is getting students to think before they make moves on the chess board and in life. He said it sometimes takes a while for students to get focused so they can analyze what they are doing, but once they get it, it is as if someone turned a light on inside their head. He said he always asks his students how they perceive people who play chess. The students always respond they think that person is smart and they realize if they learn how to play chess they will be perceived as being smart too.

"When we get into the review process we realize how much we really learn. Chess has three parts; the opening, the middle game and the end game," Walker explained. "So I like to give them the overview of what they are learning. I like to use a lot of boxing and military battle analogies when teaching."

All of the men say teaching young Black youth to think before they act is a key to decreasing the violence in many communities and lowering the prison population. Criminologists say most incarcerated people find themselves in prison because of a lack of impulse control or making quick, emotional decisions with dire consequences. Dixon and Walker say chess teaches tactics, one of the most important tactics being patient.

"These kids may be in a situation out on the streets where someone does something to them and their first thought is just to react in a way that may not be in their best interest. That's the main lesson we're trying to teach here," Walker said.

The interactive program allows the students to go through drills as many times as necessary in order to master a skill. The drills come in a variety of forms from puzzles to quizzes that bring them along at their level. Jones said even children who are considered to have learning disabilities have shown success using this program.

"We've had students who we were told could not focus for two or three minutes sit down and play a 30-minute chess game," Jones said. "This program is unique because it allows the student to learn at their own pace."

The pricing of the program is also reasonable, \$40 dollars a year will give a student 24-hour, year-round access to the program, which is cheaper than the average video game. In addition to St. Sabina, students at two Chicago parks are participating in the program. For more

information, you can visit the website [www.funwithchess.com](http://www.funwithchess.com)

"It's a program that we are trying to expand not just locally but around the country as well," Jones said.



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