

[THE ATLANTIC SELECTS](#)

Kid Chess Champions Share Their Secrets

[WATCH THE VIDEO!](#)



Sep 23, 2019 | 780 videos

Video by [Jenny Schweitzer Bell](#)

The benefits of teaching chess to children are manifold. Studies suggest that the cognitive-boosting board game, which has endured around the world for more than 15 centuries, [improves](#) a child's visual memory, attention span, spatial-reasoning ability, critical thinking, mental discipline, creativity, math skills, and logical reasoning. One study found that children who played chess scored an average of 10 percentage points higher on [reading scores](#) than their peers who didn't play.

In the short documentary *The Magic of Chess*, which premieres on *The Atlantic* today, a cadre of pint-size chess champions reveals how the practice has enriched their lives. The director Jenny Schweitzer Bell shot the film on location at the 2019 Elementary Chess Championships, a high-stakes tournament held annually in Nashville. In attendance—and interviewed in the film—was [Tani Adewumi](#), the 8-year-old Nigerian refugee who, while living in a homeless shelter with his family, beat elite-private-school kids in the New York Chess Championships.

The children interviewed in the film are articulate and wise beyond their years. “When I asked the kids questions like, ‘What has chess taught you?’, I was surprised, given their limited life experience, that they could formulate a response beyond the obvious mechanics of the game,” Schweitzer Bell told me.

Chess “teaches you how to make a plan,” one child says in the film.

“When you lose, you learn from your mistakes,” says another.

Jennifer Shahade, the program director of the [Women in Chess Initiative](#) and a chess champion herself, told me that the game’s time-honored—and generationally agnostic—appeal lies somewhere in the delicate balance between the strategic long-term planning and immediate tactical creativity it requires. “The trick is knowing when to use which type of thinking,” Shahade said. “Chess is a constant challenge where creativity meets rigorous analysis.”