

CHESS FOR FREEDOM



Chess Gives At-risk Youth a Chance to Change Path

Chess for Life

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

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In Canada, like elsewhere, the Legal system, as well as the correctional system struggle with the rise of young offenders.

The struggle is how not to lose a generation of young people – the future of a community - to Crime.

The Canadian *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) of 2003 calls for attention toward the treatment of Young offenders. Its section 38(2)(d) states that in sentencing youth:

“all available sanctions other than custody that are reasonable in the circumstances should be considered for all young persons, with particular attention to the circumstances of aboriginal young persons” .

What we need to be looking for is not just a different way to incarcerate and punish. We need to find a way to render justice by restoring communities.

In Canada, restorative justice is geared to address both victims and offenders. We believe that alternatives to mainstream justice processes in appropriate circumstances must take a forefront place in the justice system, must encourage meaningful engagement of young offenders and create opportunities for community reintegration.

Speaking of communities, we need to remember that, in Canada, over half of young offenders are indigenous youth between the ages of 12 and 17 despite making up 8 % of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada). This presentation does not focus on them but we need to keep their needs in mind: Restorative justice within the community involves them.

Today, I am privileged to present a different way that, slowly but surely, attracts more and more attention from the Judicial system and, in parallel, from young offenders:



WHY CHESS

Chess is known as a sport, an art form and a game. There are clearly set rules, principles to follow (and, on occasion, break). And for each action, there are consequences – sometimes positive and other times negative.

“Chess has key features that can help individuals learn how to make better decisions, think more carefully about consequences of actions before taking them,”

Chess for Life program



The honorable Judge Derek Redman,
Chief Justice Provincial courts of Alberta,

The creation of the program:

In Sept. 2016, Judge Derek Redman, now Chief Justice of Alberta Provincial Courts, 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 Dr. Grigg to conduct some research on it.

In doing so, Dr Grigg found out about people around the world using, what we all know as a game, to accomplish changes and found that some organizations were involved in changing the way the criminal justice system is applied:

- Orrin Hudson at besomeone.org,
- Carl Portman with prisons in the UK,
- Maurice Ashley with the District attorney's office in New York.
- FIDE and its Chess in Prison Programs.

He also found interesting research on the role of chess in a number of related areas:

- executive function,
- learning disabilities,
- addiction recovery, etc.

He presented his findings to Judge Redman.

In January 2017, the *Chess for Life* program began as a six month pilot project.

- The pilot began with a small group of 5 to 7 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, some 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. They were welcomed, and received 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, caramel knights, etc.



Note: Regardless of skill levels, many youth enjoyed playing pawn wars. One game 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 Dr. Grigg sat down, and explored the program's strengths and weaknesses.
- Input from youth was also provided through the probation officers.

The meeting concluded that the program was a benefit for the youth.

Program strengths included:

- The 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 weakness: 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)
 - Tyra Folkins
 - Andres Jimenez
- 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 SINCE ITS INCEPTION

THE PROGRAM CONTINUES TO RUN SUCCESSFULLY
IT RUNS FROM END OF SEPTEMBER TO END OF JULY, EVERY FRIDAY AFTERNOON.

TEAM MEMBERS CHANGE AS SOME GRADUATE BUT THEY ARE REPLACED BY OTHERS.
SNACKS, SOFT DRINKS, CANDIES, PIZZA CONTINUE TO BE SERVED THANKS TO COMMUNITY DONATIONS.

THE INFLUENCERS ARE STILL AROUND: PO MOST OF THE TIME ARE THERE.
SOMETIMES, PROVINCIAL CHIEF JUSTICE REDMAN, SHOWS UP.
POS, JUDGE, YO, TEACHERS END UP TALKING TO EACH OTHER

and now

THE ALBERTA CORRECTIONAL CENTER IS ORGANIZING TO RUN THE PROGRAM
THE EDMONTON YOUNG OFFENDER CENTER IS STARTING THE PROGRAM TOO
IN QUEBEC, TALKS ABOUT THE PROGRAM ARE TAKING SHAPE

Research project on *Chess for Life* program

- In September 2018, the *Chess for Life* team decided to do some research on the program with the help of Dr. Monique Sedgwick and 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.

The hope is 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.

Surprising preliminary findings

Probation officers, case workers and parents had positive feedback:

- 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.
- Youth were more patient at home; interacting more respectfully with siblings.
- Often, 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.

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.”

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 the week.**

- Youth commented that at *Chess for Life*, they felt 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

Chess for Life was re-launched in late September, 2021.

- Youth are again being referred to 25 hours of chess instruction.
- At the Lethbridge Correctional Centre, *Chess for Life* begins offering chess instruction to inmates.
- A second round of semi-structured interviews will occur with subsequent transcription and analysis.
- In terms of hope theory, we'll be looking for evidence of :
 - Goal identification
 - Pathways thinking
 - The ability to identify
 - Think through obstacles.



THE *CHESS FOR LIFE* PROGRAM EXPLORES COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES :

- 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.
- *Chess for Life* and Alberta Justice will encourage 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.

CHES FOR LIFE IS SEEKING TO TRANSFORM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INTO A RESTORATIVE FAITH OF THE ACTUAL JUDICIAL SYSTEM BY CHALLENGING ITS TRADITIONAL PUNITIVE MODEL

THE RECIPE : Chess educators + the judicial system

The chess educator:

- A chess player;
- A person with empathy and pedagogy who believes in a restorative approach to justice;

The judicial system:

- The court system;
- The department of criminal justice – crown prosecutor
- Defence lawyers;
- The Correctional system – PO interested in the restorative approach of the program and chess.

RESULT: developping self-regulatory and managing functions that are responsible for controlling cognitive processes like reasoning, problem solving, paying attention, organizing, planning, remembering, focusing, multitasking and timing: Executive functions of the prefrontal cortex.

Chess for life



**is currently looking for partners
in the justice-system to contribute to its
ongoing development.**

ALTERNATIVE TO INCARCERATION OF YOUNG OFFENDERS IS A GROWING CONSENSUS AND

CHESS FOR LIFE IS A SOLUTION TO CONSIDER

THANK YOU