

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 at the University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada**

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Chess For Life Delegate**

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

- Render justice and restore communities.

- In Canada, restorative justice is geared towards addressing the needs of both victims and offenders.
- Alternatives to mainstream justice processes in appropriate circumstances must take priority.
- It must encourage meaningful engagement of young offenders in order to create opportunities for their reintegration into the community.
- Notably, in Canada, over half of young offenders are indigenous youth, age 12 to 17 despite making up 8% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada). Restorative justice within a community concerns them as well.
- The *Chess for Life* program at the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB: A unique program



Alternative sentencing for Youth



WHY CHESS

➤ More than just a game

- Educators: It makes a difference
- Studies: The evidence is clear
- Personal experience

WHY CHESS

Chess is known as a sport, an art form, a game, a science.

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

Dr. Lance Grigg, researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, founder of the *Chess For Life* program.

Chess for Life program



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

How did it start:

In Sept. 2016, Judge Derek Redman, now Chief Justice of Alberta Provincial Courts, sentenced a youth to basketball practice.

The 12 years old youth had no priors. During the trial, Judge Redman found out the youth enjoyed basketball, and sentenced him to 5 hours of basketball practice per week.

Dr. Lance Grigg read about the case and contacted Judge Redman to discuss using chess as an alternate sentencing measure for youth involved in the criminal justice system.

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

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

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

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

- The pilot program began with a small group of 5 to 7 youth ranging in ages from 14-17 years old who 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.
- They were given a tournament-style chess set, and a carrying bag (now they get a chess t-shirt and chess socks as well).
- At each session youth were provided with snacks .

- Those learning chess would begin with simpler games that gradually introduced the pieces: pawn wars, lonely knights, roaming rooks, caramel knights, etc.



- 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

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.



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.

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...

Research project on *Chess for Life* program

- In September 2018, the *Chess for Life* team decided to do some research on the program
- 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: give **voice** to the youth

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: to provide **empirical evidence** on 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

- Acceptance, not being judged.
- Appreciation for the respectful, engaging atmosphere.
- Opportunities for more positive relationships with the youth.
- Youth were more patient, interacting more respectfully at home.
- Often, it was less difficult to get youth doing their hours in *Chess for Life* than elsewhere.
- Rationale for the program - 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 comments made by youth:

- ☞ Youth *felt accepted and respected* at *Chess for Life* sessions; not judged.
- ☞ At *Chess for Life*, they felt they can exercise **control** over their lives: They get to make some of their own choices.
- ☞ 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.
- ☞ They enjoyed learning about chess and playing with caring adults.
- ☞ Many commented on how the adults at each session were patient.
- ☞ Youth appreciated having *food* during the sessions.

For many youth, this was an important consistency in their lives: Often, there was little order in their lives and this routine offered something solid and reliable in their week

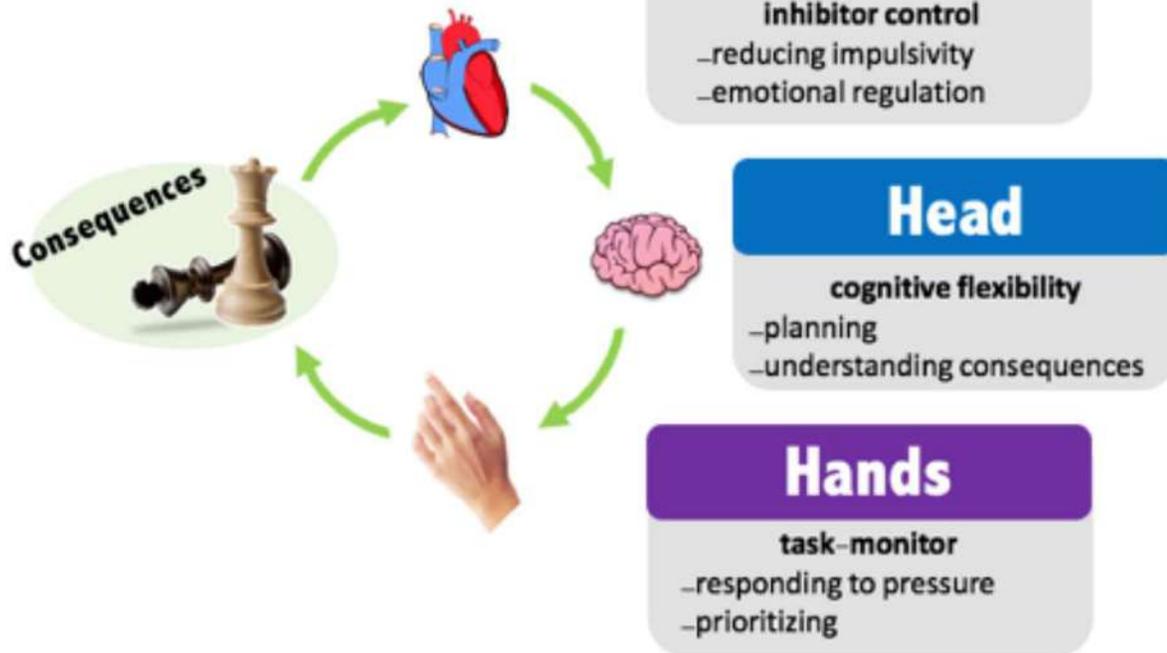
PROGRAM EXPANSION

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
 - Obstacles identification.



Chess for Life Model: Executive Functions and Problem Solving



1. Heart - Youth learn that their first response may not be the best move.

2. Head - Youth learn that they have to see the big picture/whole board to make the best decision/ find the best move.

3. Hands - Youth learn that good plans need follow through.

4. Consequences - Youth learn that they have to see the big picture/whole board to make the best decision/ find the best move.

CHES FOR LIFE

EXPLORES COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES :

- the newly created Alberta *Drug Courts*,
- chess therapy,
- neuroscience of executive function.
- *Chess for Life* and Alberta Justice will encourage suitable participants who complete the program and are willing 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.

***CHESS FOR LIFE IS SEEKING TO TRANSFORM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INTO
A RESTORATIVE BELIEF IN THE ACTUAL JUDICIAL SYSTEM BY CHALLENGING ITS
TRADITIONAL PUNITIVE MODEL***

WHAT ARE THE APT INGREDIENTS FOR SUCH A PROJECT?

THE RECIPE

Chess educators + the judicial system

RESULTS

Enhancing the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex

Developing self-regulatory and managing functions that are responsible for controlling cognitive processes:

*Reasoning, problem solving,
paying attention, focusing,
organizing, planning, memorizing,
multitasking and timing*

It is not always clear what motivates risky behaviour of justice-involved youth, however deficits in executive functions have been highlighted as a potential area of focus for those looking to know more about the experiences and choices of justice-involved youth.

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
CHESS FOR LIFE IS A SOLUTION TO CONSIDER

THANK YOU