

# Critical Chess Skills

If you cannot find good moves, you won't win. If you find a good move but you don't *understand* it, you still won't win. For example, if you have a painting worth millions of dollars but you are unaware the painting is that valuable, then you might accidentally sell it in a yard sale because you don't *understand* its value. Every chess skill you'll ever develop is about finding good moves, *understanding them*, and playing them.

In my *Parental Expectations Management in Chess* article, I discussed two kinds of skills that need to be developed: **technique** and **behavior** based skills:

1. The outcome of developing your **technique** means you will pick higher quality moves more efficiently.
2. Developing **behavior**-based skills helps you establish routines which put your mind in the right place for both playing and learning.

To develop proper techniques, you must first understand the 5 general areas of chess knowledge plus the basics. The diagram makes a puzzle because these terms are all interrelated. While there are no set definitions for any of these categories, I will do my best to briefly explain them in Layman's terms:



## *Tactics*

The outcome of a tactic is one player generally gains an advantage or nullifies an opponent's advantage by making a proper sequence of moves overlooked by the opponent. You cannot plan to make a tactic happen; they only require observation after a mistake has been made.

## *Strategy*

The guiding plan for where you put your pieces, when to put them there, and why is how a chosen strategy operates.

## *Opening*

The beginning of a chess game which "ends" when all your pieces have gotten to useful squares that support a chosen strategy. This chosen strategy is often referred to as a "Plan."

## *Middlegame*

The middle part of a game where plans evolve, and tactics frustrate plans.

## *Endgame*

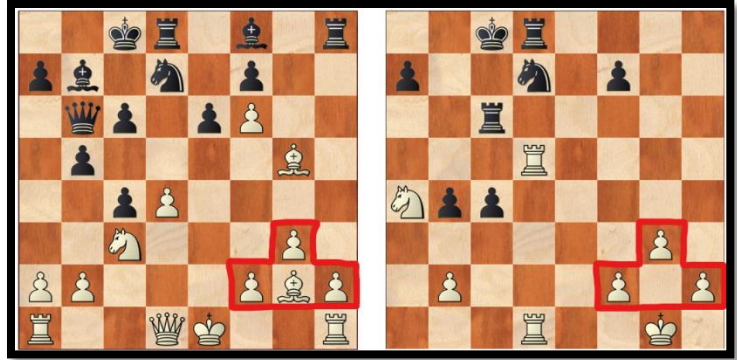
The end of the game which occurs when most pieces have been captured and few remain. The vast majority winning of endgames have one of two goals, depending on the position: either you are trying to checkmate your opponent, or you are trying to turn a pawn into a queen and then checkmate.

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While these 5 categories (plus Basics) are separated, they seamlessly flow together.

For example, there are elements in the opening (beginning) of a chess game that are present in the endgame. Look at the two chess positions on the right.

Diagram 1 shows a late-opening position. Diagram 2 shows an endgame position.



The red-outlined squares demonstrate how an opening could connect to an endgame position. The same is true for all other categories: tactics and strategy occur in every phase of the game; there are elements of the endgame and middlegame in the opening (all other combinations apply, too).

## List of Critical Chess Techniques for Beginners

The following non-comprehensive list of techniques are labeled to show you the general category of knowledge into which they fall, including the basics of how to play. I caution you: the list below is grouped by category and is not intended to represent a sequential list:

1. **BASICS** - Piece movements
2. **BASICS** - Chess Notation (spoken, not written)
3. **BASICS** - Notation (written)
4. **BASICS** - Capturing / How to capture
5. **BASICS** - Special Chess Moves
6. **BASICS** - Check, Checkmate, Stalemate
7. **TACTICS** - Counting Exchanges
8. **TACTICS** - Basic Checkmate Patterns
9. **TACTICS** - Basic tactics names and patterns
10. **TACTICS** - Finding undefended pieces
11. **STRATEGY / TACTICS** - Relative piece value and its purpose
12. **STRATEGY / TACTICS** - Types of Attack
13. **STRATEGY** - Types of Defense
14. **OPENING / TACTICS** - Opening Traps (and how not to fall for them)
15. **OPENINGS** - Opening Principles
16. **OPENING / MIDDLEGAME** - Creating and recognizing basic plans
17. **ENDGAME** - Piece combinations that can and cannot checkmate
18. **ENDGAME** - Basic Endgame Techniques
19. **ALL** - How to organize a basic attack
20. **ALL** - Learn how to defend against basic attacks

This list gives an idea of what techniques are good for newer players to learn. This list can also serve as a basic checklist to help parents keep track of what your kids do and do not know. But you cannot just learn a bunch of techniques without paying attention to developing positive chess behaviors.

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## List of Critical Positive Behaviors

There are two types of behaviors that should be learned:

1. Chess behaviors
2. Non-chess behaviors

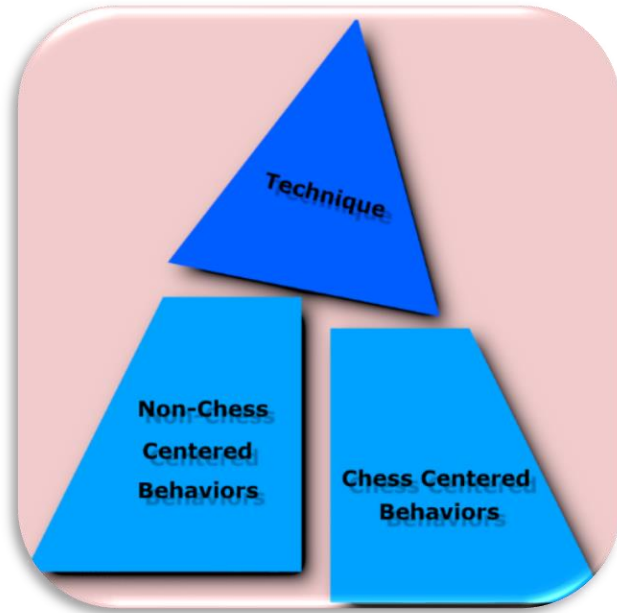
If your behaviors are not in lock step, your technique will wane. If you don't sleep, you will make poor moves. If you don't practice skills, then your technique will be off. If you don't learn how to notate, you won't learn from your mistakes. Behavior development is critical to improvement.

**Chess Centered Behaviors** give you routines to follow as you play and learn. These routines aim at practicing specific things regularly to sharpen your skills.

**Non-chess behaviors** specifically put you in the right state of mind to play and learn chess. Non-chess behaviors extend past the purview of chess. For example, if you are mean to people who beat you in chess, then you will never be able to ask them to go over the game to help you find your mistakes. Non-chess behaviors are about making it easier to handle losing, ask for help, and build a growth mentality.

In my article *Parental Expectations Management in Chess*, I presented 10 critical behaviors that are good for parents to reinforce. I will add 10 more behaviors to that list **and** label each item "Chess" and "Non-Chess." Once again, this is not a comprehensive list but a sample to help you understand the point:

1. **Chess** - Solve chess puzzles to build pattern recognition.
2. **Chess** - Find tactics in chess games you lost and create puzzles out of them.
3. **Chess** - Learn how to play with a chess clock.
4. **Chess** - Memorize the number and letter for each square on the chessboard.
5. **Chess** - Learn chess by reading about it.
6. **Chess** - Occasionally replay through old games.
7. **Chess** - Win, lose, or draw, ask your opponent to go over the game.
8. **Chess** - Look at the games of better players (even if they are confusing).
9. **Chess** - Solve chess worksheets.
10. **Chess** - Learn basic tournament rules (if you wish to go to tournaments).
11. **Non-Chess** - When you lose, practice not getting upset.
12. **Non-Chess** - Try to find the good stuff you did in games you lost.
13. **Non-Chess** - Try to find the bad stuff you did in games you won.
14. **Non-Chess** - Go to bed on time 3 nights in a row before a tournament.
15. **Non-Chess** - When you lose, tell your opponent they played a good game.



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16. **Non-Chess** - Notate all your games (write down each move).
17. **Non-Chess** - Avoid heavy meals during a tournament.
18. **Non-Chess** - After a tournament, take a day or two off from chess.
19. **Non-Chess** - Get your chess set out and clean it once a week.
20. **Non-Chess** - Always set up your pieces before putting your set away.

These and other chess behaviors are aimed at getting someone to practice skills they know or are learning. The behavior of regularly seeking practice will ensure chess success. The non-chess behaviors are more about emotional development and maintaining cognitive clarity. For example, if you eat a big meal before a chess game, you'll be tired when you play as you digest your food. I cannot emphasize enough how important non-chess behaviors are toward developing into a strong chess player.

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