

Parental Expectations Management in Chess

Let's begin by considering the Player Progression Pyramid to the right. The lessons from the Player Progression Pyramid are helpful:

1. *The better you get, the fewer peers you have.*
2. *Improvement is an uphill battle.*
3. *Improvement is like a complex maze where you sometimes backtrack.*
4. *Progress is a narrow path through which one person passes at a time.*
5. *There is more than one path through the maze.*
6. *Only 1 person can be on top.*

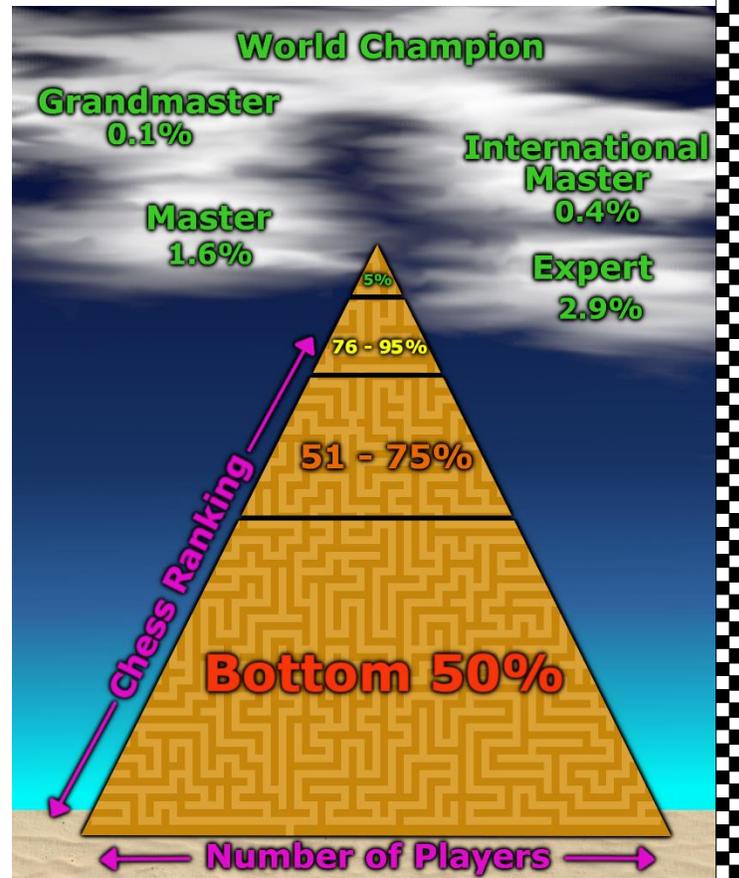
Your parental expectations must be tempered by the Player Progress Pyramid. Your parental expectations should be limited within the chess goals you develop with your child. So, what exactly are good chess goals?

Good Chess Goals are “*Technique Based*”

Here are 10 examples of chess goals that are technique based. Early on, it is important to have technique-based goals because success with chess rests on a core group of skills. For example, piece movement, knowing what checkmate is, how to checkmate, and parrying basic threats:

1. *Learn how to prevent the 4-move checkmate.*
2. *Stop bringing your queen out early in games.*
3. *Don't give away pieces for free.*
4. *Show up on time to each game.*
5. *Notate all your games (that means write down the moves to the game).*
6. *Go over your games with a coach / friend.*
7. *Don't block in your bishops with pawns.*
8. *Try to solve 10 chess puzzles in 1 day.*
9. *Play and meet 10 people from 10 different schools.*
10. *Learn a new way to checkmate with the King and Queen versus a lone King.*

These are excellent goals because they encourage either developing new techniques or honing known techniques. They all lead to progression regardless of your aptitude. You can achieve all these goals even if you lose many games.



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Another set of excellent goals are behavior-based. Essentially, anything that encourages growth behaviors is going to improve yourself as a player. Here is a list of behavior-based goals:

1. *Go to bed on time 3 nights in a row before a tournament.*
2. *When you lose, tell your opponent they played a good game.*
3. *Win, lose, or draw, ask your opponent if they want to go over the game?*
4. *Notate all of your games (write down each move to the game).*
5. *Avoid heavy meals during a tournament and drink water.*
6. *Occasionally replay through old games to see your improvement.*
7. *After a tournament, take a day or two off from chess.*
8. *Learn about chess by reading.*
9. *Get your chess set out and clean it.*
10. *Set up your pieces before putting your set away to account for all pieces.*

Behavior based goals are excellent for a different reason: they establish positive routines that reinforce your technique-based goals. In tandem, these two styles of goal setting are a powerful combination.

Common but Bad Chess Goals are Outcome Based

However, we need to understand what bad goals look like. Here is a list of common goals that are not very good. Each bears a brief explanation for why it is not a good goal:

1. *Win a trophy*
Every time you fail to win a trophy, then you are viewed as having failed.
2. *Win your games*
Every time you lose or draw, it is viewed as a failure. People do not improve by winning chess games; they improve by understanding why they lose and improving.
3. *Grow your rating / national ranking*
Ratings are very fickle. If this were your goal, every point you earn is a victory and every point you lose is a failure. If you put in hard work and effort, your rating will grow. There is never a need to worry about your rating.
4. *Win the tournament*
As there can be only 1 winner per section at a tournament, and there are usually around 3 to 5 sections, making this a goal early on in your development is overly competitive and likely to set you up for failure.
5. *Checkmate Siddarth next time*
This goal begins to approach positive goals; however, it is a slippery slope. If Siddarth, or whomever, keeps beating you and he is well above your ability, then making this your goal will set you up for disappointment. However, if Siddarth is around your level of play, then it may not be an unreasonable goal.

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Outcome-based goals risk disappointment and failure. Until you can handle disappointment and failure, outcome-based goals are not helpful. It is better to celebrate positive outcomes as they happen. But it can be psychologically and emotionally detrimental to use outcome-based goals to build expectations. The more expectations you invest into a goal, the greater the disappointment, which means the more deeply the loss is felt.

Those goals are also bad because they have nothing to do with developing technique or cultivating positive behaviors but are only concerned with outcomes. In order to achieve these desirable outcomes, you need technique, routines, and good behaviors. You can always be proud of the progress put toward technique development when you fail to win a trophy, game, or tournament, fail to grow your rating, or lose to Siddarth again. If you establish good behaviors and routines, then bouncing back from a lost opportunity becomes much easier to do.

As a parent, focus your encouragement *away* from outcome-driven development and *toward* technique and positive behavior-based development. If your child develops the proper techniques and behaviors, the outcomes will occur. In chess, internal motivation is primary and external motivation is secondary. The "*Common but Bad Chess Goals*" are examples of external motivation, which is powerful but hollow without internal motivation.

It should be noted there is a time and place for each goal in the "*Common but Bad Chess Goals*" list. However, the timing to apply those goals comes *after* your child, or any chess player, has built up enough *internal motivation* that losing and making mistakes won't push them down emotionally. Here is an encouraging meme from Savielly Tartakover, a leading chess grandmaster and chess journalist from the 1920s and 30s:



Tartakover is completely correct that mistakes have underlying truth. It is the timing that makes them wrong in most cases. For example, investing money in a company today might lose money for some currently relevant reason. But, investing in that same company 2 months from now might be an extremely lucrative decision.

Therefore, expect your child to lose, make mistakes, and struggle. Celebrate success of technique and positive behavior-based goal achievement and not just winning. If you keep your celebrations of success to technique and behavior-based accomplishments while avoiding outcome-based results *as* goals, your child will flourish in chess (or anything).

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