

# A Chess Tournament Primer for Parents

Prepared by the

**U.S. Chess Center**

8560 2nd Ave, Silver Spring, MD 20910

This is a very complete but long introduction to tournament chess for parents. If you would like to quickly access something, the quick guide below might be useful.

[Introduction](#)

[Swiss-System Tournaments](#)

[Pairings](#)

[Byes](#)

[Notation](#)

[Clocks](#)

[Withdrawing](#)

[Awards Ceremony](#)

[Tie-breaks](#)

[Ratings & the USCF](#)

[Reading TL ads](#)

[Registration](#)

[Tournament Directors](#)

[Parental behavior](#)

[Open Events](#)

**Congratulations! Your child knows the rules of chess and is confident enough to enter a tournament. This will be the first tournament for many of the players, and each tournament is a learning experience for everyone. This following guide is designed to answer the most common questions, and to prepare parents for the tournament.**

**Parents should expect to console their children when they lose and encourage good sportsmanship regardless of the results. Children play chess best when they are not surging with adrenaline (or sugar) and when they know that their primary aim is to play their best, not necessarily to win. The ultimate winners of every event are the players who do not get too low after a defeat, or too high**

after a win.

## What is a Swiss-System tournament?

**Pairings:** Most chess tournaments are known as Swiss-System. This means that players are paired against others with similar scores. The pairing system is quite complicated and leaves the director almost no room for discretion.

At the U.S. Chess Center and at tournaments we direct, we use a computer program that does the pairings for us. Although experienced directors will review the pairings for accuracy (even the best program has a few glitches), the director never arbitrarily makes changes in the pairings the computer assigns. In short, in the first round, the Swiss System operates by ordering the players by rating and pairing the top player with the player just under the half-way mark. The second player is paired against the next player under the opponent of the top player, and so forth.

Players earn one point for winning, a half point for drawing. In each round after the first round, the players compete with others who have the same number of points. If there is an odd number of players in a score group, the lowest ranked player in the group is paired against the top available player in the next group down. Players never compete against the same opponent twice in a tournament, and efforts are made to alternate the color of the pieces the player uses each round.

**Nobody is eliminated in a Swiss System tournament. All players are expected to compete all of the way through the tournament. It is bad for the tournament to have players [withdraw](#) (quit).**

**Byes:** A player with a bye does not play in a particular round.

There are two types of byes. When a tournament has an odd number of players, the bottom player does not play one round. Instead, that player is awarded a "full-point bye" meaning that the player receives a point, as if s/he won a game. A player receiving a bye will see "please wait" or "See TD" written across from his name on the pairing sheet. No player receives more than one bye per tournament. Sometimes, the player receiving the bye will be paired against someone else, who either is not enrolled in the tournament or is enrolled in a different section that also has an odd number of players. In a rated tournament the game will count for ratings, but the players both receive a point for the tournament.

In a rated tournament, a player competing in his/her first tournament will not receive a bye, except in very unusual circumstances. This is because a player will not earn a publishable rating until s/he has played four games, and we want players to earn ratings as fast as possible.

Players unable to be at the tournament for a certain round may request a "half-point bye." This second type of bye awards a player the same score as would a draw. In most tournaments, half-point byes must be requested before the player begins to play in the event and are not available for the final round. They are most often taken in the first round,

when a player cannot get to the tournament by the time it begins.

**Notation:** Many tournaments encourage (and some require) players to keep track of the moves in their games using chess notation. Generally, players in fourth grade or older are required to do the best they can “keeping score”. If players make mistakes keeping score, they usually are not able to claim draws by three-position repetition or the 50-move rule. Players may be penalized if they are required to keep score but refuse to do so.

There are several forms of notation that have been used throughout the history of chess, but the simplest, called algebraic notation, involves recording a move by writing down the initial of the piece in uppercase followed by the lowercase letter and number of the square to which it moves. A move of the queen to e7, for instance, is recorded as Qe7. The exceptions are the knight (which in English is given the initial N to distinguish it from the king), and the pawn, which is not given an initial at all (a pawn move to h5, as an example, is just written as h5). [Wikipedia](#), among various other sources, has an accurate rundown of handling specific situations that require disambiguating, such as how to record a rook moving to b2 when there is another rook that can also move there.

Both players keep track of both players' moves. The more they practice recording their moves, the easier it becomes, so if your student plans on playing in an event that requires them to notate, familiarizing themselves beforehand is a very good idea. Even in events in which notation is not mandatory, keeping record of the game can be a valuable way to improve their chess skills. By playing over the moves later on their own, or with someone else, they can assess what they did wrong and right.

**Clocks:** State championships, national championships, and most other tournaments rated by the U.S. Chess Federation use clocks to limit the amount of time each game can take, ensuring every round stays on schedule.

Chess clocks can be intimidating to young people who do not have experience with them. As with notation, we encourage students to practice with clocks enough that they are comfortable playing in tournaments that use them. However, especially at the beginner level, we caution against having students play every practice game with clocks. This tends to add pressure and can detract from the children's ability to concentrate and evaluate what's happening on the board.

When two players are using a chess clock, each player will be allocated a certain amount of time to make all of their moves in a game. If players run out of time, they lose the game. A player's thinking time only runs down when it is their turn to move. After they move, they press the button on the clock nearest to them - with the same hand they just used to make the move on the board - and then their clock stops and their opponent's starts.

Each player is allocated a certain amount of time to make all of their moves in a game. When a player's time runs out, the opponent points this out to the tournament director, and the player whose time has elapsed is declared to have lost the game. (The lone exception is that if a player's time runs out but the position on the board is such that it would be impossible for the opponent to force a checkmate, the game is a draw. For instance, if a player runs out of time

but the opponent has only their king remaining on the board, it is a draw.)

In a chess competition, the time control refers to how much time each player has to make all of their moves in a game. A time control involves a base amount of thinking time, and frequently also an increment, which is an amount of time that gets added to a player's total time after they make each move. Increments generally vary depending on the tournament, from only a few seconds to half a minute or longer. A 60;+30 time control, for example, means that each player gets 60 minutes' time for the game plus an additional 30 seconds tacked on to that time every time they press the clock to end their turn.

Some events use delays instead of increments. A delay means that for each move, the player's thinking time doesn't start running down for a brief period - never more than a few seconds - after the opponent has pressed the clock. A five-second delay, for instance, means that a player has five seconds at the beginning of their turn before their time starts ticking. Unlike with increments, unused time from delays does not carry over from move to move.

Almost every modern chess clock is equipped to handle increments, delays, or both. A tournament will always have the specific time control for the games listed on the entry information.

**Withdrawing:** We strongly discourage withdrawing from tournaments.

Players who leave because they lose are missing some of the greatest benefits of the game. Learning to come back after a defeat is very important in much more than just chess. However, if an emergency arises and a player must leave, it is crucial to inform the tournament director that the player will not attend the next round. It is unfair to the others in the tournament to leave without telling the director, as it means that at least one other player will not get to play a game.

**The Awards Ceremony:** Similarly, we think that all players should remain for the awards ceremony. In most scholastic events (all that we conduct) every competitor will receive some sort of recognition, regardless of score. Those who win the top prizes, naturally, feel better knowing that their efforts are recognized by others.

**Tie-breaks:** In most tournaments, a pre-determined number of top prizes (usually trophies) are awarded at the end. In a four-round tournament (which is most common) there will always be ties. When two or more players have won all of their games, we will have a blitz chess play-off, in which the co-champions play one game of five-minute chess to determine who wins which trophy.

When the tied players did not win all of their games, we use a tie-break system that determines the strength of the players' competition by counting the number of points the opponents earned. (Ratings are irrelevant to tie-breaks.) We acknowledge that this system, like every other, is not completely "fair," but we have to break the ties somehow and this is the method used in nearly all chess tournaments.

**Ratings and the USCF:** Many of the chess tournaments we sponsor, and most tournaments elsewhere, are sanctioned by the [U.S. Chess Federation](#) (USCF, also

known as US Chess).

Nearly always, membership in US Chess is required in order to participate. Despite the similarity of names, there is no connection between the US Chess and the U.S. Chess Center.

Annual membership dues for players under age 20 are \$20 and include a digital subscription to *Chess Life*, a monthly magazine geared towards adult players, and Chess Life Kids, a bi-monthly magazine written for a sixth-grade reading level.

[Membership in the USCF](https://new.uschess.org/) may be purchased online via the USCF website <https://new.uschess.org/>.

The USCF developed, and is constantly modifying, a [sophisticated rating system](#) for its members. By playing in tournaments, players earn a rating, which rises when a player wins, and falls each time a player loses. The rating of the opponent is the major component of the formula. (The USCF rating is different from the rating system we use for some of our after-school chess clubs, as the latter is derived only from games the students play during these club meetings.)

Many children place great value in their ratings, a fact we at the U.S. Chess Center find mildly disturbing. Players sometimes play considerably below their capability when they notice that their opponent's rating is much higher or lower than their own. As a result, we make every effort to reduce the significance of a player's rating. A defeat that a player learns from makes them a stronger player, even though their rating goes down.

Contrary to the belief held by some, a chess rating has no relationship to the child's value as a human being. Tournaments usually are rated by the next day and always within a week.

There are many rating systems that measure online games. These rating systems use different algorithms for changing ratings after each game or tournament and have less validity than the national US Chess rating system. Sometimes, there is little relationship between an online rating and a national rating.

The [U.S. Chess Federation](#) also has several web pages that are related to

- [USCF Rated Chess Events](#)
- [USCF Rating System](#)
- [Allowable Time Controls](#)
- [USCF Lifetime Titles](#)
- [An Introduction to USCF Rated Tournaments](#)

**How do I learn about tournaments?** Tournaments rated by the USCF are frequently advertised in the Tournament Life Announcement sections of *Chess Life* and *Chess Life for Kids* magazines, both print and digital.

To find tournaments specific to your area, you can visit the [Maryland Chess Association](#), [Virginia Chess Federation](#) or the clearinghouse

(<http://www.vachess.org/Clearinghouse/Clearhouse.html>) websites.

**Registration:** Some tournaments offer a reduction in price for players who register in advance. It is in the interest both of the organizer and the players to register early, as long lines form of players who have waited until the last minute to sign up. Normally, once a player has paid an entry fee, the player need only show up at the time the first round is scheduled. If the tournament is free, players must come at the registration time to let the organizer know that they intend to play and should be paired with an opponent.

**The Tournament Director:** The Tournament Director (TD) makes the pairings each round and settles any sort of dispute that arises during a game. TDs rule on claims of time forfeiture and claims of draws. TDs have the authority to punish bad behavior or other rules violations by adding or subtracting time from a player, or by forfeiting a game.

**Parents:** In general, parents and coaches are required to stay out of the room where the children are playing. They can serve several useful functions, however. Tournaments last a long time, and parents can be very helpful by providing food for their children. Although many kids can plan a "power lunch" and choose foods that will allow them to play their best, others need guidance in this area, lest they eat nothing but candy and soda. **Children should not eat while they are playing a game.**

Parents offer encouragement and consolation between rounds, and some provide help analyzing the games their kids played. Children are not well served by having parents argue about such things as pairings or rulings of the TD. Such arguments delay the entire tournament, which goes on long enough as it is. A four-round tournament with a G/30 time control will last about five hours, and sometimes as much as 6 1/2 hours, including registration, a lunch break and the awards ceremony. Usually the advertisements for a tournament will give some indication of when the event is expected to end.

**Open Events:** We encourage people who want to improve to play against the strongest competition available. Players learn best by playing against stronger players who demonstrate good moves. Some kids very much enjoy the feelings of equality that are found playing against adults in open tournaments. An open tournament, unlike a scholastic event, is open to anyone.