**Teaching Go to Children: Basics**

Here are some hints about teaching Go to children. While these are based on many years of experience, they are no doubt incomplete and we are always happy to receive any feedback and suggestions.

We are very grateful to the teaching advice produced by the Belgian Go Association, and we have incorporated some of their ideas into this

1 Aim of teaching and atmosphere of the club

* The main aim of the teaching should be that everyone should have fun and should if possible gain enjoyment from playing Go, so that they will want to come back another time! Becoming a strong player is a secondary aim. If you have a group of 20 children and after a couple of months most of them are still playing you should count this a success even if their playing standard has not improved much
* The atmosphere of the club should be fun, nobody should be made to feel sad that they didn’t play well or made mistakes. Many schools now teach Carol Dweck’s idea of a “growth mindset” where there is an emphasis on the idea that everyone can improve and to treat setbacks and mistakes as learning opportunities. This is a good spirit in which to run a club
* It is good to stress that Go has a history of being a polite game, and it should be played in a spirit of good sportsmanship. If this is made clear from the start of the club, that is much easier than trying to introduce it later. Emphasising the importance of being polite and respectful to the opponent whether winning or losing will make the club easier to run (and will please parents too). It is good to explain that part of being polite is not distracting the opponent or crowding round and interfering with other players’ games
* Children differ in how much they enjoy being competitive. It’s good to say that while the children in the club will compete with each other, they are also all a team who are learning together and if people help each other to learn then everyone will benefit.

2 Starting teaching and setting the scene

* It’s really important to learn the names of your students as soon as possible.
* It is good to start by asking everyone what they already know about Go, and what related skills they have e.g. if they have played other board games
* Make sure you know the timing of the session e.g. be clear about the time when you need to start packing up and set an alarm if necessary. Have a plan of what to do in each session (hopefully the materials in this curriculum will help) and try to make sure that it is an appropriate length for the time of the session

3 Basic teaching style

* Don’t teach too much in one session. For example, teaching just how to capture stones, and giving the children the chance to try it out, is almost always better than trying to teach all the rules in one go.
* It is important for teaching to be as interactive as possible. For example, when teaching the rules, children will enjoy it much more if they can physically put the stones on the board and take off the captures rather than watching someone else do it. If you are using a projector and a screen, or a smartboard, it can be good to have a pointer that children can use to indicate where they would play.
* Where possible let people find out things by themselves by asking questions at the appropriate level rather than always telling the answers. If your question turns out to be too hard you can give hints.
* Teach in short chunks, interspersed with the opportunity to try things out. Don’t stand and talk for a long time as children are likely to lose concentration
* If children are distracted and not looking at the teaching, don’t just ignore that but ask everyone to watch while you speak. Don’t single out people who weren’t looking. Stress the benefits that if everyone can watch for a short time then they can all learn and practice the same thing together
* Be careful of using language like “suicide” and “killing” stones which some might find inappropriate.
* Try to listen and try not to avoid answering questions if possible. Give positive feedback like “That’s a good question”. Sometimes it might be necessary to say that a question will be answered later, or that you only have time to answer so many questions at the moment.
* If commenting on mistakes, try to be as positive as possible e.g. “I see you had a good idea to try to capture this stone but I don’t think it’s going to work. Can you see another stone that it might be easier to capture?” Make sure that positive feedback outweighs suggestions for improvement.

4 Beyond the rules and basics

Once you have progressed beyond the rules and basics of the game, here are some other considerations:

* You will need to reinforce topics that you have taught by coming back to them, for example you can’t just assume that everyone fully understood ko or the self-capture rule because you taught it once.
* The slowest learners and any new players are the most important because they are the most likely to feel unhappy or anxious. It’s good to always have some material that the weaker players can succeed at. For example, every session could start with a few puzzles where you find possible captures on a whole board (GoMagic has some of these puzzles). Stronger players can also enjoy doing these as quickly as possible.
* Don’t have too high expectations! Try not to be disappointed when children struggle to understand something, it is an interesting challenge to find a better way to explain it.
* Teaching materials should be fun if possible. If you can produce things that are colourful or have nice graphics that’s great. Of course not all teachers will be able to do this.
* It’s good to introduce some elements of Go history and culture from time to time as children find this interesting. They are often fascinated by the age of the game, the number of players in different countries, and some quirky facts (e.g. that Go has been played in space). Showing Hikaru cartoons or Japanese woodblock prints that feature Go can be interesting.
* Always remember that grades/strengths are all relative. To a complete beginner, a 20-kyu seems like a Go genius! So there’s no need to describe particular grades/levels as “beginner” level. It is fine if children progress relatively slowly

5 More advanced teaching

* If reviewing a game, try to only pick out one or two learning points from the game. If there is a recurring theme e.g. lots of empty triangles when another move would have been better then that’s a good thing to pick. Remember to have more positive feedback (praising good moves or ideas) than criticisms
* It’s good to stress that every move should be part of a plan to do something (e.g. attack a group, defend a group, make territory, invade territory). Once children think in this way (e.g. plan to play in the biggest area that doesn’t belong to anyone yet) then their play is likely to improve
* It is usually better to do puzzles in a small group rather than to hand out sheets of puzzles for children to do on their own. If you don’t have a smartboard or projector you can print large versions of the puzzles (one puzzle on a sheet) so the children can put the stones on the sheet to show the answer. In a group, give everyone a turn to do a puzzle. Make it clear that you can think about other people’s puzzles but you mustn’t answer them! Don’t have too large a group (e.g. you could do puzzles with some children while others play) as children will have to wait too long for their turn.
* At first children love to capture stones but as they improve they often don’t find it easy to distinguish between big or small moves, or between strong or weak groups. So it can be good to practice understanding the whole board position (on 9x9, say) with some whole board puzzles.
* Try to explain abstract ideas using analogies e.g. describing groups with 0, 1 or 2 eyes as the “house of straw”, “house of wood” and “house of bricks”.
* It’s good to give the idea that playing on small boards like 13x13 is a normal and good way to play Go rather than just for beginners who aren’t ready for 19x19 yet. Young children who play in clubs with relatively short sessions and where there are beginners are likely to benefit from playing mostly 13x13 Go for a while.
* If any particular children have persistent problems with behaviour or don’t seem interested, it may be necessary to raise this with the parents or school at some point. It may be that they don’t really want to be at the club (e.g. they have been sent there only because it is convenient for the parent).

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