

Here's a quick chess tournament primer.

Scholastic chess tournaments are held usually on Saturdays from about 8:30am to about 4:00pm. Each kid plays 5 games, each game lasts at most one hour long. You play all 5 games, win or lose, there are no eliminations. First, the tournament is divided into sections – usually Kindergarten is a separate section, then 1st-3rd grade is a section, and 4th-6th grade is a section. Some tournaments also break out the beginners (Under 800 rating) from the more advanced players (Over 800). Some tournaments are grade level tournaments where each grade is a separate section. Chess tournaments use a Swiss pairing system where winners are paired against other winners, and losers against other losers.

You must register in advance for all tournaments, no registrations allowed at the door. And tournaments always fill up, so if you delay your registration, many times you will not get in. Cost is about \$15, which pays for the site, janitor, and the trophies. You check in about 8:30am and go to a waiting room. Pairings are posted on the wall telling you what board number to sit at and what color to play. Round 1 usually starts about 9:00am, round 2 about 10:15am, break for lunch (you can buy pizza and hot dogs on site or bring your own). Round 3 usually starts about 12:00noon, round 4 about 1:15pm, and round 5 about 2:30pm. These times are approximate and will vary some from tournament to tournament. If you have a sports conflict you can request a bye for one or two rounds, and still play the other rounds.

You score 1.0 point for a win, 0.5 points for a draw, and 0.0 points for a loss, so a perfect score would be 5.0. If you have a score at the end of 3.0 or higher, you should stay for the trophy presentation at about 3:45pm. They also give out team trophies – they take the top 4 players in each section from the same school and add together their scores, so the schools with the most players have an advantage in getting the team trophies.

Parents are not allowed to watch the games or communicate with their kids during the game. And there is some down time for parents, so bring a folding chair, and a book or laptop. When the kids are done, they will come find you and you get to wipe away the tears or congratulate them on a win. Sometimes they are back in only a few minutes (Scholars mate!). Most kids really enjoy tournaments and make new friends and like the competition. In between rounds, if they wrote down their moves, I review their games and tell them where they made mistakes. I don't ask first timers or kids in K or 1st grade to record their moves as it can be too distracting, but the older experienced kids should.

Is your kid ready for a tournament? Your kid should know how all the pieces move, their point values, how to castle, the opening guidelines, how to stop a scholar's mate, and how to defend pieces when attacked as a minimum. I have been teaching these things in chess club, many kids have it down by now. In my experience, even the kids that don't seem ready really benefit from tournaments. There are lots of other beginners there, and with the Swiss pairing system, everyone finds their proper level eventually. It does take a little emotional maturity to be able to take a loss without it being devastated, but most kids shrug it off in a few minutes, and the best kids learn from their mistakes and vow never to repeat that one again. Remember: no pouting when you lose, and no gloating when you win!

You can check an approximate rating for your child at the **ChessMagnetSchool.com** website. It calculates a rating for your child based on his progress there – website ratings start at 700 and go up from there. If the website rating is above 800, your child probably has the basics down. Login under your child's nickname and password I sent earlier, then click Options, Progress Report to see his rating and level. The levels go: Squire (700), Baron (750), Count (800), Duke (850), Earl (900), Guardian (950), Herald (1000), Joustier (1050), Knight (1100), Yeoman, Warden, Marshall, Defender, Protector, Commander, Captain, Commodore, Admiral,

Overlord, Wizard. If his level is Count or higher, then his chessmagnetschool rating is 800 or higher, and I would say he could try his first tournament. Chessmagnetschool ratings are unofficial and separate from tournament ratings.

Tournament ratings also called NWSRS ratings (NorthWest Scholastic Rating System) start at 400. A tournament rating of 800 is about average for most kids, and anything above 1200 is quite strong. But you only get an official rating after you complete your first tournament. You can look up NWSRS ratings here: <http://whsca.org>. There is still another USCF (United States Chess Federation) national rating (not to confuse you) which starts at 100 and is used by adults and kids alike for national and WCF (Washington Chess Federation) sponsored tournaments. National ratings are usually about 200 points lower than NWSRS ratings on average. To get a national rating, you need to join the USCF and play in a nationally rated tournament, and usually only the stronger kids get these.

It is a real eye opener to see what is possible in chess and how fun and social it is. Kids that play tournaments get extra motivated to work on improving, as there is real fame and glory for those that score well. I am amazed at what chess competition has done for kids with learning problems or with lack of confidence. Its also one of the few activities where elementary kids can compete against other schools, and its great for those kids that may not be into sports (its also great for those that ARE into sports!). **It teaches many of the lessons needed in life** – don't give up, consider all your options, think before you act, be aggressive, mistakes have consequences, sometimes you get a second chance, take advantage of opportunities before they disappear, etc.

If your child scores 3.0 or higher in any tournament, he/she qualifies for the **Washington State Elementary Chess Tournament** to be held in Apr in the Spokane this school year! The location moves around the state every 3 years, last year it was in Redmond WA, the year prior in Vancouver.

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