

# **A new look at a Chess and Bridge program for youth in an era of increasing digital dexterity.**

By Serge Bondar

## **Rhetorical question.**

Would you like your kids to get hooked on playing the “Grand Theft Auto IV,” a new hit in the next generation of video games?

This game is not for sale legally to kids 16 and younger, since it brings user into the world of intense violence and bloodshed, with use of drugs and alcohol – an interactive world where one can “safely” fulfill fantasies of having sex with prostitutes, killing cops, enjoying being the member of a gang, and stealing cars.

Regardless of your answer, the chances are they will; and it is naïve to think that kids younger than 17 will not get their hands on this product just because it is illegal to buy at this age. More than a million copies are expected to be sold this year.

So, if you do not like it, who is to be blamed for - kids themselves, game makers, parents, or other members of society?

## **Overview.**

The general trend of the last decades is that teaching our kids good values becomes an increasingly more and more difficult job.

We must rely less on our public school system to do this job. We can NOT hope that kids will learn from a good example of the family members and friends around them, or from the books, radio, TV shows, movies, and other sources of mass media. With the recent addition of the Internet, any hope of effective parental control of traffic on the information-super-highway is long gone.

So how do we as society cope with those challenges?

Parents do take most of the responsibilities and the burden. Some pay for expensive private schools or choose home education; some assume the full-time jobs of driving their kids around from one lesson to another, from softball practice to the hockey game just to keep them constantly busy so they will not have any free time to get in to trouble. There are few more questions.

While on the surface, this approach yields good results. But, is this the most effective way for our kids to become active contributing members of society?

Are there any negative “side-effects”? And most important, what can working parents should do, if they cannot afford the expensive solutions listed above?

## **Social scientists provide some clues.**

Our kids are becoming more technologically savvy at a much earlier age than decades ago. However, they lack one very important element in personal development – ***self-regulation.***

Research on kids’ self-regulation in their free play has produced a stunning finding: children’s capacity for self-regulation has drastically diminished.

“Today’s 5-year-olds were acting at the level of 3-year-olds 60 years ago, and today’s 7-year-olds were badly approaching the level of 5-year-olds 60 years ago, “ Elena

Bodrova, senior researcher with Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, explains. “So the results are very sad.”

Sad, because self-regulation is incredibly important. **Poor development of executive function is associated with high dropout rates, drug use, and crime. In fact, good executive function is a better predictor of success in school than a child’s IQ.** (Executive function is one of the most critical cognitive skills for children to develop; it has a number of different elements, but a central one is the ability to self-regulate). Children who are able to manage their feelings and pay attention are better able to learn. As executive function researcher Laura Berk, professor of psychology at Illinois State University, explains, “Self-regulation predicts effective development in virtually every domain.”

“Because of the [increase in academic] testing, and the emphasis now that you have to really pass these tests, teachers are starting earlier and earlier to drill the kids in their basic fundamentals. [Free] play is viewed as unnecessary, a waste of time,” Dorothy Singer, Yale’s psychological researcher, says.

It seems that in the rush to give our children every advantage – to protect them, to stimulate them, to enrich them – our culture has unwittingly compromised some of the activities that could help children most – the old-fashioned intellectual games like bridge and chess, mind-sport exercises which help children to create their own rules and practice self-control in a safe, socially-interactive environment.

### **Answer to the rhetorical question.**

We as a society are responsible for failing to provide our youth with alternatives to the excitement of video gaming. An **affordable** alternative for most children to do something proactive with their minds is missing in today’s society.

“A Mind is a Terrible Thing To Waste”, so we cannot blame those with limited budgets for playing “Grand Theft Auto.” Playing video games arguably can make one smarter and contribute to the development of some computer skills; however, doing that for hours and hours each day primarily contributes to the growth of a big number of social freaks, who cannot distinguish between right and wrong in real life.

**It is much more effective, on the long run, to spend time and money preventively, than on correction of children and young adults who already have gotten into trouble.**

**Chess and Bridge Programs are part of the long term solution.**