

Kids Can Play Bridge Too
(And You Can Teach Them!)

By Marty Nathan

We need to teach kids to play bridge. It's as simple as that.

The average age of ACBL membership is around 60. It's a little younger for all bridge players. That isn't necessarily a problem. I'd guess the average age of the typical bridge student is also around 60, and that IS a problem. Our current students are often familiar with the game. They might have grown up in a bridge-playing household. They probably played as teenagers, "retired" to pursue a career and/or family, and are now coming back to the game. But we have lost the next generation. They played video games rather than bridge. There is no next generation to come back to the game.

So if you and I are going to have bridge opponents 20 years from now, we'd better start developing them now. If we lose this generation, we'll lose the game as well. What a terrible loss that would be for all of us – and for them.

"Can't we just wait until they are older?" I hear you ask. The answer to that question is a definitive "No." These youngsters will find something else to occupy their time – there certainly is no shortage of alternatives – and it will be much harder to pry them away from that passion after they retire. We can, and must, make bridge their passion now.

We've all heard about parents over-programming their kids, and that makes our task even harder. How do we compete with soccer and dance and karate and the hundreds of other more established activities? My suggestion is to get there first. We should target middle-school children. They're old enough to handle the math and not as fully committed to other activities. After-school sports and clubs are mostly a high school experience. (After-school day care is another matter; we'll come back to that.) We've had some success with older kids, and we've had bridge students as young as 6, but middle school is our best shot.

It's just like teaching adults...

In many respects teaching kids is like teaching adults. You don't need to radically change your lesson plans. I've tried programs aimed specifically at kids such as Mini-bridge¹ and have found my regular lessons, somewhat tailored, work just as well. And it gets them playing real bridge quicker. It's often easier to teach kids. They didn't learn bad habits 20 or 30 years ago.

¹ Even though it didn't work well for me, you might want to try Minibridge. You can learn about it, including the rules, at <http://www.acbl.org/documentLibrary/teachers/MiniBridge.pdf>.

Teaching kids offers a hidden benefit. They'll make you a better teacher. Children have little inhibition about letting you know when they are bored or lost. They'll talk to a neighbor or let their eyes wander around the room. You'll get feedback on your teaching, like it or not.

...Only Different

There are, however, differences that you must accommodate in your lesson plan. With adults you might get away with talking for an hour and then letting them play (though even with adults that's a bad idea), but not with youngsters. School teachers know to use the "six-minute rule" You can't talk for more than six minutes straight. You must stop to reinforce the concept. This might be through applying it in a hand or in a verbal quiz. If there are two different answers given, let them as a group (or subgroup, perhaps each table) hash out the right result.

You have to keep them engaged. Use visual aids; many kids (and adults too) learn better when they see something than just by hearing it. Scatter those visual aids around the room; walking from one to another as you talk means the students have to follow you. Ask questions, even if you answer it yourself. Just give them a second or two to work out their own response first. Or let the kids volunteer their answers. Oral quizzes will illustrate the points you are teaching while keeping the students involved in the process.

In her beginner bridge series, Audrey Grant suggests a wonderful technique. Give each table a deck of cards and each player takes one of the suits. Then rather than putting the hands on a whiteboard, let the students create them at each table. You just tell them by suit which cards in each hand. Let's say you are teaching responses to 1NT. You can easily illustrate the difference in an invitational and game hand by having them change one card. Or responding with a five-card suit compared to a four-card suit. And then a six--card suit. You get the idea. The key here is the kids are physically involved, not just passive observers.

You already know not to talk about "ruffing" or "king queen tight" without first defining the term. With adults, however, you can talk about "distribution" and they have a basis of understanding that word. The kids' vocabularies aren't as well developed. I nevertheless teach bridge terminology, and may well be increasing their vocabularies at the same time. Don't underestimate these younger students. I admit I always get a few titters when I introduce the word "dummy." I've found I can mitigate this by stressing we mean like a ventriloquist's dummy – declarer gets to do all the talking. But they'll still laugh for a while.

As with vocabulary, the math skills are often limited, especially for younger children. They won't figure their point count as quickly. They'll have more trouble scoring. But with your help (and a little maturity) they will overcome these barriers.

If you use handouts, limit them to one page per class. In my first class with kids, I asked them if they'd like handouts that covered what we discussed in class. They all agreed, "No, we already have too much to read." For the next group I just gave out one-page handouts, obviously just the highlights. That seems to work.

Kids need lots of review. They won't get it all the first time. Start each lesson with a review of the material from the prior one. If you've had a long layoff such as summer vacation, spend a whole class or two reviewing.

Kids will play slower than adults. Their fine motor skills aren't fully developed; mere manipulation of the cards takes longer. (Card holders will help as well as presorting the hands.) Their attention spans are shorter. They won't count their points as quickly. Depending on age and how long they've been playing, allow 10 to 15 minutes per hand.

They Need a Place to Play

There is one other difference with kids, and it is the biggest stumbling block in retaining young students. They need a place to play. You can easily move your beginning adults into a local club's 99'er game or even the I/N games at your nearest tournament. Or they can organize their own games at home. But kids don't have this luxury. They obviously can't play during the school day and night games finish too late. Too many bridge programs teach children to play and then lose them when there is no place to practice their newly found skills.

You must create a regular kid's game. Playing with their peers reinforces that bridge isn't just an "old person's" game. This might be an after-school program or club. Consider a community center or church/synagogue. Atlanta Junior Bridge has had great success with an ACBL sanctioned game at a local club the first Saturday of every month. We hold classes the rest of the Saturdays. We do it early (9:30 to 11:30) to minimize conflicts with the many other activities kids have. We are considering switching to Sunday afternoon in the belief that there will be even fewer conflicts.

Have your youth game extend through the summer. Sure, your attendance will be down due to vacation travel and summer camps. But don't let the kids go three months without playing. Any middle school teacher will tell you that considerable time at the start of each year is devoted to reviewing what the students forgot over the summer. Don't make your job more difficult than it needs to be.

You'll want to make some other accommodations. Younger children cannot easily hold 13 cards; have card holders available. You can lose a lot of class time while kids with undeveloped fine motor skills sort the cards. If you are preparing hands in advance, sort them by suit and by rank within suit.

Organize tournaments for kids in conjunction with your sectionals and regionals. We've been holding youth games in conjunction with tournaments in Atlanta for almost two

years. We've held separate Georgia Youth Team and Georgia Youth Open Pairs State Championships, with over sixty youngsters participating in both. We're working on youth national championships! Be sure to have plenty of adults to assist with scoring, sorting hands and moving boards but not with bidding and play decisions.

With proper adult supervision (due to safety and security concerns), on-line bridge can provide some unique opportunities. Local Atlanta bridge teacher Carolyn Eckert has organized Internet matches between students in Germany and those in her class. Just think of all the prospects.

Where to Teach

So how do you get started? You need to find a class, which is easier said than done. Start with schools – that's where, after all, your target market is. The ideal is to make bridge part of the curriculum. A new organization, School Bridge League, is working on just that. It has developed a concept called "Bridge in a Box". The lessons in this program, which can be found on their web site, are correlated with the academic curriculum standards for all states and provinces. For the most part, the lessons address educational standards in Math, Language Arts and Social Studies. All of their material is free.

If you can't get in the classroom, shoot for after-school programs. With so many working mothers, many middle schools now have these. Tip: Administrators aren't as busy in the summer months.

Start with the principal if you can get in to see her. Stress how bridge is not just fun, but will help the students with their schoolwork as well. We have a study to prove it. Print out "Statistically Speaking"² and take it with you. The article documents the link between learning bridge and improved test scores. Thanks to No Child Left Behind, every school is looking for this.

Many schools have summer camps. Why not suggest they incorporate a bridge lesson of, say, two hours for five days. That's enough to whet the appetite of any aspiring bridge player. Many schools have an all-activities type camp, a perfect place to add bridge.

School Bridge League has prepared a summer camp curriculum and soon will have a curriculum that a bridge teacher could use for an after school program. A 'Talking to Educators' toolkit should be available this summer.

You can hold a bridge summer camp anywhere. Libraries are a great location as a simple poster will reach exactly the parents and kids you want. Consider community centers, churches and synagogues. They generally have the space as well as tables and chairs. Your local bridge club offers all this and has an incentive to teach bridge.

² Available at <http://www.acbl.org/documentlibrary/news/statisticallyspeaking.pdf>

You'll need to publicize your classes. The ACBL cooperative advertising will pay up to 75% of those costs. You might also get help from districts, units and you local clubs. Local businesses might help underwrite some of your cost. Remember everyone loves to help kids. The more funding you can get this way, the less you have to charge. Using such sources, the not-for-profit Atlanta Junior Bridge has been able to offer classes and camps for free. To be fair, many teachers do contribute their time.

Where to get more help

The ACBL has a web site – <http://www.bridgeiscool.com/> just for juniors (up to age 26). While the emphasis is on older students, you might find some help here.

The Atlanta Junior Bridge website is <http://home.earthlink.net/~atlantajuniorbridge/>. The AJB President Patty Tucker will be happy to advise you on setting up programs in your area. You can email Patty at patty@atlantajuniorbridge.org.

The School Bridge League is a new organization but has a lot of material including lesson plans at <http://www.schoolbridgeleague.com/>.

Patty Tucker, President of Atlanta Junior Bridge and a former North American Open Pairs champion, recently remarked, “I started playing bridge when I was 11 and have played my whole life. It has provided me mental challenges, a wonderful social structure and an opportunity to meet some great people. Bridge is a gift we can give to children.” Teaching kids and spreading the word on our favorite game can be personally rewarding. You will, moreover, ensure we have opponents in the decades to come. Starting teaching them now.