

FIRST GO: Guidelines for Teachers

By Tyler Reynolds ©2008

Here're my quick-and-dirty recommendations for introducing GO to absolute beginners. Presuming they're already interested enough to show up at your Club (of course) this is how you should play their first game with them:

- Introduce the most basic rules as quickly as possible---DON'T TALK TOO MUCH (use as few sentences as you can to make sure the idea is planted)
 - Explain the Object of the Game "To occupy & surround more space on the board than your opponent."
 - Playing Sequence: "Black moves first, then White; one stone at a time on the intersections; the stones don't move after that unless they're surrounded (and captured)."
 - Liberties: "Every stone has up to four 'Liberties' once it is placed on the board." [place 3 stones: one each on a corner, the edge, and in the center of the board] "A 'Liberty' is an empty point right next to the stone played *connected by a line*." [Ask the student how many Liberties *they think* each of the 3 stones you placed has, and then point out the correct number---DON'T BE CRITICAL all their answers are 'good' whether or not they're correct. IT'S *NOT* A TEST.]
 - Surround to Capture: Place a stone of the other colour on one of the liberties of any one of the 3 stones already on the board, and ask the student how many liberties *they think* the stone has. Take the rest of the stone's liberties, and demonstrate a simple capture. Ask your student to place opposing stones to capture one of the other original 3 stones, *but stop them when it has 1 liberty remaining*. Explain that a stone with only one liberty is said to be 'in Atari' which is like 'Check' in Chess (on the next move the stone with only 1 liberty could be captured). Let the student finish the capture and remove the stone.
 - Grouping: "When two stones of the same colour are on points right next to each other that are connected by a line, those stones are considered 'Grouped' so they share their liberties." [Add a stone of the same colour to the last of the 3 original stones remaining, and ask the student how many liberties *they think* it has now. Ask the student to use the other coloured stones to put that group into Atari. *Wordlessly correct it, if necessary*, and ask the student how the group that's in Atari might get away... [You're looking for a connection that will add liberties to the group---BE PATIENT and congratulate them once they figure it out---even if it will become a Ladder. DON'T GET SUCKED INTO EXPLAINING WHAT A LADDER IS YET!]] Tell your student that they're ready to play!

- GET THEM PLAYING RIGHT AWAY... Make sure to give a new person a 6 stone handicap on a 9x9 board, and TAKE IT EASY ON THEM... [*IF they ask*, explain that the handicap stones will be their first move, and that it will make the game more fair "since they're new"] As White try not to capture before you've built a Living (Double-Eyed) shape for yourself.
 - Congratulate your student whenever they make a decent move.
 - TRY NOT TO BE THE FIRST ONE TO CAPTURE A STONE... Go ahead and leave a lonely stone to get captured while you're making Life... UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU ELIMINATE THEM FROM THE BOARD!
 - PLAY FOR A TIE---even if that means leaving stones vulnerable on purpose (don't tell them you're doing this).
 - Don't talk too much during the game... If you really want to commentate, share the basic motivation behind *some* of your *own* moves, that's okay. **Don't criticize!**
 - Try not to make any unusual captures (playing on a point with no liberties) unless there's already been a Ko; but, if it's unavoidable:
 - Explain that you can only move on a point that will have no liberties if that point is the last liberty of one of the other colour's stones/groups. "Essentially, you can only move into capture when you're capturing, and then the aggressor wins the tie..." [If you're using Chinese (Area) rules, self-capture is permitted, so that's not quite true, but the clarification that follows still holds...]
 - "Whenever you place a stone, the opponent's liberties are counted first, and if they have none, those stones are removed before any friendly stones' liberties are counted. The attacking stone gets its liberties from the space left after the captured stones are removed." If necessary, prompt the student to seal up his/her territory in the endgame, by saying you're "trying to sneak around" their wall as you play your stones to reduce their territory [in the *least aggressive* way possible].
- Don't try to explain The Ko Rule or Passing (to enter the Scoring phase of the game), unless and until it comes up. Don't bother with Scoring unless they press you---and ***absolutely not*** Komi or Handicapping!
- Don't try to explain how to make Life at least until you've made a living shape on the board... Ideally, **keep playing until the board is full** and each group has at least 2 Eyes left... Then before your student fills his second-last eye, stop them and explain that their stones are in danger; ask them what they think might happen next... show them that they'd be putting their stones in Atari, and tell them that they can Pass their move at any time instead of playing; but, that if both of you Pass in sequence that the game is over.
- After the game review what makes a Double-Eyed shape and the Ko Rule. Mention that because it takes fewer stones to make a Double-Eyed shape in the

corner than along the side or in the center, that that is why it is usually best to play in the corners first. [Demonstrate 3 of the smallest living shapes: 6 stones in the corner, 8 on the side and 10 in the center.]

- **THANK THEM FOR PLAYING WITH YOU AFTER THE GAME AND OFFER TO SHAKE THEIR HAND.** Get them to play another handicapped game with someone else ASAP!

I know that seems like a lot; but, if you stick to it, you'll dodge a lot of problems, and avoid turning people off before they've even felt what it's like to play.

For young children (typically less than 8 years old) it is very important that you:

1. Let them decide when they'd like to play once they're aware of the "Survival GO" version. Preferably, wait for them to ask you to play with them. If they suggest GO, that's great; but, only casually suggest it if you're asked what you'd like to play. The important thing is to get their voluntary buy-in, without any strings attached.
2. Don't manipulate them into playing after they've obviously reached the limit of their attention span. Nothing breeds resentment toward a game faster than being forced to participate. Use a smaller grid next time if you haven't finished a single game before interest is lost. Just play Survival GO with the very young (2-5yo), until they show an interest in more complex play.
3. Pay attention to their body language, and if you notice their attention fading, stop explaining and get back to playing: "Let the stones walk". If that doesn't work, offer to play GO with them again whenever they ask you to.
4. Consider secretly promising yourself that you will not capture any of their stones before the game is over (two passes, and Life & Death is evaluated normally) This changes the flow of the game for you alone; and on a full-sized 19x19 board, I estimate this being worth about 10-stones in handicap.

About the Author: *Tyler Reynolds became a GO enthusiast at the age of 12, having previously abandoned Chess before he was 5. After his eldest child started school, Tyler volunteered to run an extra-curricular GO club there, and promptly got involved with the American Go Foundation (AGF) and the Canadian Go Association (CGA). Tyler also took it upon himself to promote GO more broadly in the community and started **GO for All**, presenting GO-centered seminars to elementary schoolchildren, in 2007. The CGA appointed Tyler their Youth Coordinator in 2008. Tyler Reynolds continues to operate **GO for All** as a business through his web site: <http://www.goforall.ca>*