

Teaching your child MiniBridge



What child? Why should you?

"Your child" may be your son or daughter, your nephew or niece, your grandchild or godchild, or even your next door neighbour's child. It doesn't matter who they are, or what age – children really enjoy learning MiniBridge once they start. They love being clever and working things out – and winning – and the game has many educational benefits too. It will also be very worthwhile, for there will be one more young person in the world who has learned something about bridge and maybe decided to take up the game, or perhaps is more likely to take it up a little later in life. And you will have done your bit to save our game from extinction – which is what will happen if we don't bring more young people into bridge.

If you are not exactly sure how MiniBridge works, or how to go about teaching it, this series of articles aims to help. I will take you step by step through how to explain the mechanics of MiniBridge, the order in which to introduce its various features and the practical ways to play and enjoy the game. I'll pitch it for a typical young person aged around 11 – a nice age to learn.

What is MiniBridge?

MiniBridge is basically bridge without the bidding. To decide who is going to play the contract, you add up your points in the usual way and the partnership with the higher total wins the contract, the player with the higher total in this pair becoming declarer. At this point dummy goes down and declarer decides on the contract – which suit or no-trumps, game or part-score. Game contracts are 9, 10 or 11 tricks in no trumps, a major or a minor respectively, and part-score is any 7 tricks. Scoring is just as in bridge, non-vulnerable. The only difference in the play is that the opening lead is made after dummy has been faced.

That's it! Pretty straightforward, if you are a bridge player. But there are quite a few points that need to be appreciated about how the game works. So let's go back to the beginning and take it step by step.

Lesson One - The Basics

If your child hasn't played cards before, you will need to start by explaining the suits, the honour cards with aces high, that we don't use the jokers. Then that the game is played as two partnerships, North-South and East-West. Although it's a game for four, you can manage perfectly well teaching the game with three people, or even two with a bit of imagination and dexterity.

Next describe tricks, remembering to explain about the lead, following suit when possible, and who leads to the next trick. When discarding, point out that you can't win the trick, however high the card chosen (we are just talking about no trumps to start with).

Don't just tell all this to your pupils - show them. Play with a single suit with the two removed first, for the less experienced. Encourage the players to watch the cards carefully and try to remember what has been played. After two tricks have been completed, the person holding the highest outstanding card should be able to predict that they will win the third trick. Then add a second suit, so that discarding comes into the picture. Remove the two again so that you have 24 cards in play. Note that however many cards are in use, there are always four cards per trick and the number of available tricks equals the number of cards in play divided by four.

It is best to play each hand "duplicate style", so you can keep track of what is going on (you will want to do this more later, but start as you mean to go on). Explain how cards in tricks won are placed upright, and cards in tricks lost are placed sideways on. Help learners to remember this by pointing out that lost tricks look like a minus sign, while won tricks make a plus sign. Or even better, you could say that live soldiers stand up, but dead soldiers lie down! An important point is to count the tricks at the end of play and agree how many each side has won **before** collecting up the cards for the next deal.

As you graduate to using a full deck, this is a good point to explain about shuffling, dealing and sorting your hand. This process is quite difficult for small hands and requires quite a lot of practice, so it's not a bad idea to set your child the task of practising this between lessons. Younger ones may also need a card holder – you can easily create something suitable using a breakfast cereal box and a pair of scissors – cut a slot in the cardboard so the cards will poke through. Or give more creative children another task, to make something that works for them.

Once the basic trick-taking process has been grasped, move on to playing as partnerships. This is another difficult concept and takes practice. Partners work as a team and it doesn't matter which of them wins the trick, the main thing is to win as many as you can between you. You may like to introduce the general principle of "second player plays low, third player plays high" at this point, but do stress that this is only a rough guide and isn't always right.

Now is the time to move on to the business of having a "declarer" and a "dummy". Dummy, by the way, is a terrible name for children – they hate being a dummy. One teacher I know calls it the "David" instead. Choose your own name if you like! Explain how to count up the high card points held, using the familiar scale: Ace = 4, King = 3, Queen = 2, Jack = 1. When the calculations have been done, beginning with the dealer and then in clockwise order, each player now announces how many points his or her hand contains. Get your child to work out that there are 40 points altogether between the four hands in each deal and see if the announced total comes to 40. If it doesn't, try again. Now work out which partnership has the most points – this partnership becomes the "declaring side" and the other pair are the "defending side". There is a re-deal if the point distribution between the partnerships turns out to be 20:20. (Lots of practice in mental arithmetic here).

Show how the dummy hand is laid out in columns, explain who makes the "opening lead" and how declarer decides which cards to play from both his or her own and dummy's hands. Now everyone can see two hands and declarer has to make at least seven tricks to "win" the deal – that's more than half the tricks, but is only fair as the declaring side has more than half the points in the pack.

If you are playing with only three people, you can easily see how you now really don't need a fourth, as dummy is out of it. If you have a foursome, it is a good idea to get dummy to come round the table and work as a team with declarer, deciding between them how to play the hand. Let them discuss their plan out loud, there's no harm in this. You now have a complete game that you can play and score by totting up the number of tricks won. Take time to practise this before moving on.

For these early stages, we have concentrated on the mechanics, but there are still some real "bridge" ideas that have been introduced. In the next lesson we'll start to look at how to introduce some useful card play techniques, and then move on later to trumps, game and part-score contracts and scoring.