

“Ready, Aim, Hire a Fortnite Coach: Parents Enlist Videogame Tutors for their Children”

By: Sarah E. Needleman
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Ally Hicks fretted over her 10-year-old son, Rob, playing the hugely popular shoot-em-up videogame “Fortnite.” It wasn’t the violence or the amount of time she was worried about. It was the result. He wasn’t winning.

So she hired him a coach. For about \$50, Ms. Hicks purchased four hours of online lessons from a player she found through a freelance labor website.

For many children, “Fortnite” has become a social proving ground. More than 125 million people play it world-wide, according to its maker, mostly in a free mode pitting 100 combatants against each other until one person or team is left standing. Winning bestows the kind of bragging rights that used to be reserved for the local Little League baseball champ. Just like eager dugout dads opening their wallets for pitching lessons, videogame parents are more than willing to pay for their children to gain an edge.

“There’s pressure to not just play it but to be really good at it,” said Ms. Hicks, a project manager from Winchester, England. “You can imagine what that was like for him at school.”

Rob hopes his friends don’t find out how he upped his game. “They’ll probably think I’m cheating or something,” he said. “That’s how 10-year-old kids work.”

Until recently, people seeking help with videogames almost exclusively were adult hobbyists and older teenagers aspiring to go professional, according to businesses that contract with coaches. Now these businesses are hearing from parents who refuse to let their elementary- and middle-school-age children fall behind.

Nick Mennen was happy to pay \$20 an hour for his 12-year-old son, Noble, to take “Fortnite” lessons. The dad is already dreaming of a scholarship—or at least some tournament money. (*“Fortnite” creator Epic Games Inc. recently pledged \$100 million in tournament prizes. Some colleges recruit gamers with financial incentives to join their varsity teams.*)

Noble used to win “Fortnite” infrequently before he began taking about six hours of lessons a month. “Now he’ll throw down 10 to 20 wins,” said Mr. Mennen, a software developer in Cedar Park, Texas.

The success has made Noble competitive with his dad. “I should be the one charging him,” Noble said. “He’s not as good as me.”

Coaches can be found on social media or through contracting sites such as Gamer Sensei and Bidvine, which said it has hired out more than 1,400 “Fortnite” coaches since early March. Some coaches can’t believe parents want to sign up their children for lessons.

“It’s really surreal to me,” said Logan Werner, an 18-year-old “Fortnite” coach in Roy, Utah, who plays the combat game on a professional team called Gankstars. “My dad would have never paid for me to take videogame lessons.”

Hiring a “Fortnite” coach for a child is no different than enlisting an expert to help a child excel at basketball or chess, parents say. Some sit in on lessons to make sure coaches are professional and that their children, well, level up.

“I want them to excel at what they enjoy,” Euan Robertson said of his sons Alexander, 10, and Andrew, 12. He hired them a “Fortnite” coach in June, who can stay as long as the children keep up their grades.

Mr. Robertson, an insurance professional in Arzier-Le Muids, Switzerland, is perfectly fine with his children gaming. “There isn’t any inherent risk,” he said. “They’re not going to break a leg playing videogames.”

Dale Federighi, a software engineer in San Jose, Calif., signed himself up for “Fortnite” lessons a few weeks ago so he could play alongside his sons, Joel, 6, and Elliot, 11. In this case, his children wanted no part of the coaching. “They dissed it,” he said. “They’re both very stubborn.”

“I felt like taking lessons was over the edge,” said Elliot. Now, he’s reconsidering. “I don’t want my dad to be better than me.”

Each Sunday night, JD Giles and his 10-year-old son, Blake, look forward to their “Fortnite” lesson with a coach they know as “Convertible.” Mr. Giles initially sought lessons for Blake as a birthday gift. Then he got hooked. “Our skills were nowhere near where we needed them to be,” said the sales executive from Cumming, Ga. He has spent \$45 on three one-hour sessions and has committed to at least three more for himself and Blake. The investment is already paying off.

“Within one week, I actually got a solo win,” Mr. Giles said. “The other dads I play with congratulated me. I earned a little credibility with my son and his friends—and my wife and daughter made fun of me.” Mr. Giles’ 13-year-old daughter, Morgan, says “it’s kind of cool but weird at the same time.” She dislikes how her dad screams with delight whenever he wins a match. “It’s annoying.”

Paul Rakovich’s 7- and 9-year-old sons grew suspicious when their dad suddenly became a lot better at “Fortnite.” Mr. Rakovich, of suburban Denver, confessed to getting an online coach. Now all three take lessons separately.

“My oldest is better than me, no doubt about it, and I wanted at a minimum to hang at his level,” Mr. Rakovich said. He tries to squeeze private sessions in during the workday at the marketing agency he runs, but has had to cut them short to deal with clients. “I had grown-up stuff to do,” he said. Some parents set a low bar for success. “Not dying in the first two minutes would be nice,” said Adrian Luff of San Marcos, Texas. He gets it when his sons, ages 7, 9 and 11, grow frustrated with “Fortnite.” He gets that way, too, and thinks his lousy track record is super embarrassing since he works at Twitch, a live-streaming service where top “Fortnite” gamers show off their skills.

The three boys, all of whom have had “Fortnite” coaching, have won matches. Mr. Luff has not. He says that’s OK because he clings to the hope that at least one of his sons will go pro. “They can fund my retirement,” he said.

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