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The New Jersey Families Study

How do families build skills in their young, pre-school children and help them get ready to learn?

Overview

Families are small schools, and parents are children's first teachers. Every child in America is being home schooled in the sense that children's expectations, aspirations, and early abilities are shaped at home. Their behaviors, learned skills, and knowledge are forged in the crucible of parent-child interactions. Yet we know surprisingly little about the nature, frequency, or quality of these interactions.

In the New Jersey Families Study, we ask: *How do families support their children's early learning?* Our study features a highly innovative "video ethnography." We use direct observations of parent-child interactions to deepen our understanding of the contextualized strategies that families from a wide variety of backgrounds and in different social and economic circumstances use to build skills in their young children. Unobtrusive technologies in the form of video cameras placed strategically in up to four rooms in participants' homes (rooms where most interactions occur) and activated continuously throughout the day and evening for two weeks constitute the primary means of data collection.

Interactions that hold particular interest are those that are believed to be linked to cognitive and social-emotional development—the amount of reading and talking parents do with children, children's sleep routines, their diets and nutrition, their exposure to electronic screen time, structure and routines at home, and the way that stress outside the home affects parenting practices. Taking a holistic approach to parent-child interactions and filming families in their natural habitats over an extended period will not only help more children to become school-ready. This unique study will also lead to a better appreciation of the daily struggles facing many families and thereby help schools become more "children-ready."

Where We Are Today

Data collection from 21 families in Mercer County, NJ is now complete, including 5,700 hours of video footage contained in 463,000 discrete video clips. Survey and interview data collected during six additional points of contact with families supplement the video data. Our goal now is to open these multimodal data to a worldwide research community. In so doing, we aim to make two contributions: first, to the understanding of early childhood education and development and, second, to the emerging science around big data. Our next step is securing planning-grant funds to carry out several interim tasks needed to facilitate researchers' access to and analysis of these innovative data.

The NJFS Team



Boriana Pratt is a statistical programmer at the Office of Population Research and the Data Manager for the New Jersey Families Study (NJFS). She has a Master's degree in Biostatistics from the University of California, Berkeley, where she also worked for a number of years in the School of Public Health on a longitudinal study of the relation between children's asthma and air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley. Prior to coming to Princeton, Boriana held a computer programmer position at Mathematica Policy Research. Boriana has been involved with the NJFS for almost four years, mostly with the video data. She enjoys working with different types of data, and this project provides unique challenges.

Ben Johnston provides advice and assistance in the transcoding and management of the extensive video data in the New Jersey Families Study. As Senior Educational Technologist in Princeton's McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, Ben works with faculty members from across the University to facilitate the integration of digital media and platforms in teaching and learning and the implementation of technology tools into scholarly work. Formerly Manager of the Humanities Resource Center and Humanities Computing Specialist in the Center for Digital Humanities, Ben has filled many roles at Princeton in support of technology and education during his 15 years at the University. Prior to coming to Princeton, Ben worked at Bryn Mawr College and at Columbia University. He holds an undergraduate degree from Earlham College and a Master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University.



Jeffrey Himpele is a Lecturer in Anthropology and directs the Anthropology Department's VizE Lab for Ethnographic Data Visualization, a unique hub of scholarship and resources that seeks to bring both data visualization and documentary film into the context of ethnography. As a collaborator on the NJFS Project, Jeffrey is working with the team to create the platform for the analysis of the big data set of ethnographic video. He is especially interested in creating forward-looking methods for moving back and forth between the qualitative analysis of visual recordings of individual activity, while using the same video content to generate databases for interactive data visualizations.

Jeffrey is the author of *Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes*, a book based on years of field research in La Paz, Bolivia. His prize-winning documentary films have been recognized by the American Anthropological Association and the Royal Anthropological Institute. *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá* has been named as one of the 50 most important films for teaching anthropology. His current film in progress is a musical documentary on the adventures of the steel guitar sound, starting with the lap steel in Hawaiian music and its evolution to the pedal steel in the honky-tonks of country music and beyond.

Contact Information

For more information about the project or to make a contribution, please contact:

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