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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 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. Video cameras placed strategically in participants' homes 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

Our recent development efforts transformed an earlier prototype user interface for the NJFS database into a full-featured application that allows researchers to search and organize videos using projects and playlists. Our re-designed video search feature guides researchers to videos by first selecting families based on desired family characteristics (for example, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status), then allowing researchers to specify video metadata of interest, including clip duration, time of day, day of the week, week of study (first or second), room type (living room, kitchen, etc.) and tags (that is, who the people are in the video clips and their activities and behaviors).

New NJFS Leadership



The New Jersey Families Study focuses on parent-child interactions in children's early years and aims to better understand these interactions as a way of helping more children become school ready. Data collection is complete and NJFS researchers are well along in their efforts to curate a user-friendly early childhood data set for family researchers. It is not practical to code more than 500,000 discrete video clips by hand or to produce manual transcripts of the audio. NJFS researchers are beginning to collaborate with computer scientists for help in computer vision, speech recognition, and machine learning.

Thomas Espenshade, a Senior Scholar and Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, in the Office of Population Research at Princeton University, has directed the NJFS for the past decade. He has said that new challenges often call for new leadership, and he is delighted to announce that Joanne Golann has agreed to assume responsibility for the future direction of the project. Golann is an Associate Professor of Public Policy and Education at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development. She has been a member of the team since earning her Ph.D. in Sociology at Princeton University, where the study is based. Espenshade said, "Joanne is a good friend and a creative, brilliant, and trusted scholar. I am confident that the project will continue to grow, prosper, and reach new heights under her stewardship."

A sociologist and ethnographer, **Joanne Golann** studies how culture shapes education policy and practice. In the New Jersey Families Study, she explores how families, across race and culture, build skills and knowledge in their children's earliest years. "I am excited to take the helm of this groundbreaking project. I look forward to building collaborations here at Vanderbilt and with our partner institutions," said Golann. With support from the National Science Foundation, Golann and her team are analyzing video data on parent-child interactions to understand similarities and differences in parenting strategies by social class. Ultimately, the New Jersey Families Study seeks to revolutionize understanding of family dynamics on early child development and education and to help all young children thrive from the start of life.



Contact Information

Please visit our website: <https://njfamilies.princeton.edu>

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

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