

Issue 4
Spring 2018

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 build skills in their young, pre-school children and help them get ready to learn?* Our study features an innovative "video ethnography." We use direct observations of parent-child interactions as a way to deepen our understanding of the contextualized strategies families from a variety of backgrounds and in different social and economic circumstances use to build skills in their young children. Unobtrusive 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 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 versus chaos 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 will not only help more children to become school-ready. This unprecedented study will also help schools become more "children-ready" and lead to a better appreciation of the daily struggles facing many families.

Where We Are Today

We collected data from 11 families by the end of 2017, when we began a second round of recruitment aimed at households from the middle and lower parts of the income distribution. We finished filming in family #12 in May and will begin video recording in families #13 and #14 in June. Additional families are in the pipeline. Our goal is to have a final sample of 20 families that are representative of the Mercer County population. No other data set on early childhood education and development compares with this one.

Here are our Princeton undergraduate research assistants:



Jazmyn Blackburn is a rising senior in the Sociology department, with certificates in Cognitive Science, Urban Studies, French Language & Culture, and Teacher Prep. She entered the field of sociology with a background and interest in ecology and animal behavior. After studying animals in their ecological environments, she became intrigued by how people behave in their urban environments. She is interested in community development in urban neighborhoods, particularly concerning children and youth. She works closely with the Princeton University Pace Center for Civic Engagement as a project leader and board member for the Community House programs. She aspires to work on urban education policy in the future and shed positive light on urban working class communities.



Kasia Kalinowska is a rising senior in the History department, concentrating in the History of Science, with a certificate in Global Health and Health Policy. Her academic interests and research lie at the intersection of medical history and sociology, particularly concerning reproductive and women's health. She has worked with the Social Intervention Group of Columbia's School of Social Work evaluating a microfinance HIV intervention program in Kazakhstan and is currently a student fellow with the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, Women in the Global Community Project. She is excited to be spending her upcoming summer in Zithulele, South Africa as a student researcher at the Jabulani Rural Health Foundation. She will also be spending a month in the San Francisco Bay Area working on an ethnographic project on Catholic reproductive health centers. On campus, Kasia sings in the women's a cappella group, The Wildcats, performs in student-run and departmental theatre productions, and is a volunteer with the CONTACT crisis hotline.



Katherine Moraes is a rising senior in the Sociology department. She is particularly intrigued by the role of education in reducing inequality and how different individuals associated with a child's education, such as parents, teachers, and counselors, contribute to each student's success. Her other interests include social networks, public policy, statistics, and machine learning. She aims to combine her two passions of statistics and sociology by using data science to make a positive impact by identifying problems and solutions in society. On campus, she is a member of Princeton Running Club and serves on the Princeton Latinos y Amigos Executive Board. This summer she is interning in Buenos Aires.

Contact Information

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

Thomas J. Espenshade, Principal Investigator
Office of Population Research, 249 Wallace Hall, Princeton University | Princeton, NJ 08544
Tel. 609.258.5233 | tje@Princeton.EDU