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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

With funding from the University's Data Driven Social Science Initiative, the project conducted two focus groups in December 2020 with experts in early childhood education. The purpose was to solicit feedback on useful content labeling for the 463,000 video clips in our data archive, to gauge potential users' reactions to video clips displayed at high, medium, and low resolutions, and to begin to assemble a "wish list" of other desirable features for a user-friendly early childhood data resource (for example, transcripts of the audio). Our plan is to use artificial intelligence to automate the content coding and then house the clips in a searchable database.

New Members of the NJFS Team



Dawn Crossland Summers is an independent consultant with more than ten years of experience in public opinion research. She guides clients in all aspects of the research process, including design, implementation, and analysis. Dawn is a formally trained focus group moderator, having completed the intensive course at RIVA Inc., and specializes in qualitative research methods. She moderated the NJFS focus groups in December 2020.

In addition to her consultancy, she serves as Director of Communications for Shiloh Baptist Church, a distinguished Trenton, NJ institution committed to community engagement, empowerment, and social justice for its members and local residents. Prior to consulting, Dawn worked for 15 years with Princeton Survey Research Associates International where her most recent position was Senior Project Director. Dawn studied literature at Brown University.

Richard Hall is a fourth-year doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. He worked as a behavioral interventionist and a school counselor in Vermont and Colorado before returning to academia in 2017. Richard joined the NJFS in 2019 and is collaborating with his advisor, Joanne Golann. His particular interest is exploring how different family characteristics influence the ways that parents interact with their children. In addition, he is interested in enhancing his understanding of qualitative methods for his dissertation work. Richard expects to complete his PhD in 2022 and begin a career in international education policy, implementation, and evaluation. Richard graduated from Bowdoin College with a BA in Government.



Cecilia H. Kim is an undergraduate student at Princeton University pursuing a major in Chemistry and a certificate in Global Health Studies and Materials Science. She is interested in issues of educational equity and accessibility and is an Advising Fellow for Matriculate, a non-profit organization that mentors high-achieving, low-income high school students through the college process. She joined the NJFS as a research assistant and served as rapporteur for the early childhood expert focus groups. Using the behavioral activity codes generated from these groups, she is now tagging a subset of the video data for initial analysis.

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 | <http://scholar.princeton.edu/tje>

Newsletter edited by: Kristen Cuzzo, Administrative Assistant, Office of Population Research, Princeton University