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The New Jersey Families Study

Overview

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

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 a highly 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 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 will constitute the primary means of data collection.

Interactions that hold particular interest are those thought 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 over an extended period will not only help more children become school-ready. This unprecedented study will also lead to a better appreciation of the daily struggles facing many families and assist schools in becoming more "children-ready."

The New Jersey Families Study breaks new ground. It is the first time anyone has attempted an in-home naturalistic observation of this breadth, intensity, or duration.

Where We Are Today

- Data collection for the New Jersey Families Study is moving steadily ahead. To date, 11 families have completed all stages of data collection, including the two-week, in-home video recording.
- These families come from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, they tend to be tilted toward the top half of the socioeconomic distribution.
- A second wave of recruitment has begun, with efforts focused more on working-class families. We are reaching out to pre-schools and social service agencies in Mercer County, NJ that are addressing the needs of lower-income families and their children.
- We expect to have a final sample of nearly 20 families.

The NJFS Team

In this edition, we introduce **Joanne Golann** and **Anna Weiss**, our Vanderbilt University members.



- **Joanne Golann** (on the left) is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education and an Assistant Professor of Sociology (secondary appointment) at Vanderbilt University. She began working on the New Jersey Families Study as a graduate student at Princeton University, and has since taken on a leadership role in the project. She is interested in exploring how families across different social classes establish rules, routines, and authority patterns in the home. She is currently working on a book on school discipline, *Scripting the Moves: Class, Control, and Urban School Reform*, based on 18 months of fieldwork inside a high-performing “no-excuses” charter school.
- **Anna Weiss** (on the right) is a second-year PhD student at Vanderbilt University and Joanne’s advisee. Previously, she was a public schoolteacher and teacher coach in Philadelphia, a school leadership coach in San Jose, CA, and a teacher evaluation specialist in Oakland. Her experience includes years spent at both charter and traditional public schools. As a researcher, she is interested in the contextual and identity factors which influence school leader decision-making.

Contact Information

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

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