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 has concluded successfully, and we are preparing the data for analysis. Support from the university's Data-Driven Social Sciences Initiative will permit us to hold focus groups with potential users of the data and receive input on the most useful high-level behavioral activity codes for tagging the video clips. We are also continuing to work with Princeton Research Computing to identify a software system to support a secure, data-sharing platform to house approximately 463,000 video clips that we have collected from in-home video recordings of 21 families in Mercer County, New Jersey. The video data will provide an unprecedentedly granular view of how families support their children's early learning.

New Members of the NJFS Team

Irene Kopaliani is a Cloud Architect for Princeton Research Computing. Leveraging her cybersecurity and cloud expertise, she is establishing secured research infrastructure for Princeton University faculty and researchers. She is also an advisory board member for three university computer science and computer engineering programs. Before joining Princeton University, Irene lectured at Baker College and worked with Michigan Eastern District Federal Court as a digital forensics expert. She also worked with the Millennium Challenge Corporation in building cybersecurity and computer science programs at the Georgian Technical University. She holds a Doctorate in Management Information Technology from Lawrence Technological University in Michigan with a specialization in cybersecurity.

Michael Lachanski graduated from Princeton University in 2015 with an A.B. in economics and certificates in statistics, management systems, applied mathematics, and finance. He received a Master's in Public Affairs degree in 2020 from Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs. He is interested in the use of big data for social science research and policymaking. He was the first Princeton undergraduate economics major selected for the SINSI Scholarship and the first SINSI Fellow placed at the Department of Transportation and the Department of Commerce, where he worked on regulatory analysis and labor market issues, respectively, at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Kara Mitchell is a doctoral student and graduate research assistant at Vanderbilt University. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Economics with a second major in Public Policy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to starting at Vanderbilt, she worked with Texas Appleseed as a Southern Education Leadership Initiative Summer Research Fellow. Additionally, she worked as a Client Services Associate where she analyzed higher education financial data. Kara is interested in researching the experiences of Black girls in school, student-teacher interactions, and the intersection of critical race theory and education.

Contact Information

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

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