

Issue 2
Summer 2017

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 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 over an extended period 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.

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

- Our research team is housed at Princeton University's Office of Population Research and consists of faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and computer programming support. Faculty and students at Vanderbilt University and Princeton Theological Seminary are also part of the team.
- We have recruited a small but diverse sample of 12-14 families in the Princeton-Trenton (New Jersey) area that agreed to have two weeks of their daily lives and routines video recorded.
- Colleagues from Princeton University's Office of Information Technology are setting up the recording equipment in each home and returning two weeks later to take it down.
- We have completed filming in 10 families with an interim target of 13. We would like to move closer to 20 completed families, depending on funding.
- Kati Li, a recent PhD graduate from Princeton's Department of Sociology, is beginning to assemble the documentation for the New Jersey Families Study.
- Jahnavi Bhavsar, a summer 2017 intern, has taken the first steps in thinking about the analysis phases of our work.

The NJFS Team

In this edition, we introduce **Jahnavi Bhavsar**, our summer 2017 intern. She is a rising junior and student of sociology and the humanities at the Dalton School in New York City. She worked on the New Jersey Families Study during the month of August, studying video footage of the NJFS families and researching video analysis techniques. Jahnavi focused on the breakfast routines occurring in three different families, and wrote up a mock transcription for one of them. She also began a correspondence with coding software companies for future use. Her stay with us culminated in a presentation on her findings, and a plan on how to use video analysis for future primary research. She plans to use her experience to advance her research interests in implicit bias and the sociology of squash.



Contact Information

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