

Issue 1
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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, because they usually occur out of the public eye and are considered off limits to researchers.

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. 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. 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. Information from the video ethnography is being supplemented by survey, interview, and brief video data collected during six additional contacts with families.

We anticipate that information acquired using these newer technologies will be superior to data collected in more traditional ways, such as interviewing parents about their childrearing behaviors. A video ethnography reduces the social desirability bias that can sometimes surface in survey responses when respondents give answers either to make themselves appear in a more favorable light or that they believe researchers want to hear. Moreover, this newer mode of data collection does not require participants to remember what happened or when. Finally, viewing families in their daily routines has the potential of serendipitously capturing prominent events and behaviors that investigators might not have thought to ask about in standard surveys.

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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. 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.

Where We Are Today

- We have assembled a talented team consisting of Princeton University graduate and undergraduate students, faculty from other universities, computer programming support from the Office of Population Research, and other project staff from Princeton Theological Seminary.
- All of the necessary Human Subjects approvals have been obtained.
- Final versions of the survey and interview protocols are complete.
- Two sets of video recording equipment have been purchased.
- 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.
- Fourteen families from Mercer County (New Jersey) have consented to participate in the study.
- Filming has begun, and we expect to be finished with all 14 families by mid-summer 2017.

Contact Information

For more information about the project or to make a tax-deductible contribution, contact:

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