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 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. Video cameras placed strategically in participants' homes 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

We are pleased to announce the launch of a new website for the New Jersey Families Study (https://njfamilies.princeton.edu). It describes our ambition to create an early childhood database for the worldwide research community, while honoring promises of confidentiality made to participating families. Meeting this goal serves the larger purpose of expanding the range of scholarship on early childhood education and opening the data to diverse perspectives and interpretations. In addition, with the help of a research software engineer on our team, we have begun to design, build, test, and operationalize a searchable database for the 460,000 video clips in our data archive. Researchers will be able to query the database using a manageable set of filters based on metadata derived from the clips.

New Members of the NJFS Team

Colin Swaney is a Research Software Engineer for Princeton's Data-Driven Social Science Initiative, specializing in high-performance computing and data-intensive statistics. His work primarily focuses on developing tools and methodologies to solve computational challenges associated with large-scale social science data sets. Colin holds a PhD in Finance from the University of Iowa, where he studied the application of computational statistics to high-frequency trading. He previously worked as a quantitative researcher and data scientist in the investments and financial technology industries. Colin is working on creating a searchable database for the project.

Savannah Thais is an Associate Research Scholar at Princeton University, where she focuses on machine learning (ML). Her current work is centered on using geometric deep learning to build faster, more efficient data reconstruction algorithms for the High-Luminosity Large Hadron Collider and on incorporating physics constraints and expected symmetries into ML architectures. She also works in the AI Ethics space, focusing on regulation of emerging technology, informed consent for data collection and algorithm design/deployment, and community education. She is the founder and Research Director of Community Insight and Impact, a non-profit organization focused on data-driven community needs assessments for vulnerable populations and effective resource allocation. She is extremely passionate about the impacts of science and technology on society and is a forceful advocate for improving access to scientific education and literacy, community centered technology development, and equitable data practices. In the NJFS, she has consulted on ML methods for cleaning and processing video data.
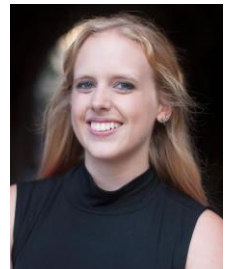
Kristen Cuzzo Neri joined Princeton University's Office of Population Research in 2018. She was previously an Assistant Director/Project Manager at a market research company in southern New Jersey for ten years. Kristen became involved with the New Jersey Families Study in 2020, editing the project's newsletter and more recently launching the new NJFS website. Currently, she serves as an Administrative Assistant to numerous faculty as well as to the Financial Management Office for Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs.

Contact Information

Please visit our website: https://njfamilies.princeton.edu

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

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