

Issue 5
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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 build skills in their young, pre-school children and help them get ready to learn?* Our study features an 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 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 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 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

Data collection for the New Jersey Families Study is far enough along that we have begun thinking about next steps. We completed video recording in 16 families by the end of August with two more underway. We expect to have a final sample of 21 families, with all data collected by the end of 2018. We imagined at the outset an NJFS dataset available primarily to students, postdocs, and faculty at Princeton University. However, it has become apparent that to maximize the benefits of the NJFS data, they should be shared on a much wider basis. We are now considering assembling a restricted-access, public-use NJFS dataset.

This Issue's Featured Project Team Members

Meet our project manager, Laura Di Panfilo, and two more members of our research staff:



participants.

Laura Di Panfilo is currently working on her Master of the Arts in Ministry at The General Theological Seminary in New York City to finish her requirements for holy order in the Episcopal Church. She became involved with the New Jersey Families Study while completing her Master of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary. Laura is interested in how people practice their faith traditions and how religion influences their everyday lives. She has enjoyed learning how parenting values are practiced in the home through her work with the New Jersey Families Study and especially enjoys conducting interviews and interacting with



Catherine Thomas is an Administrator with the Danielson Group, which partners with educators and policy leaders at all levels to strengthen professional practices and promote education policies that elevate teacher development and leadership in service of student learning. She has an MS in Infant and Parent Development from Bank Street College of Education, where she designed and conducted ethnographic interview projects. Her clinical experience includes conducting neurobehavioral evaluations with extremely premature infants, and developmental assessments with NICU graduates and their families.



Mario Yepes-Baraya, PhD, is an independent consultant with experience in educational research and evaluation. In the past 15 years he has worked with teachers and school districts to improve reading, science and mathematics teaching and learning. He became interested in the New Jersey Families Study and began working as a volunteer in the fall of 2017. He believes that understanding how culturally diverse families communicate with their children is an important step in improving learning and teaching in and out of school.

Contact Information

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

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