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# The New Jersey Families Study

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*How do families build skills in their young, pre-school children and help them get ready to learn?*

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## 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 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 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 have reached an important milestone. Data collection from 21 families is now complete, including nearly 463,000 discrete video clips representing more than 5,700 hours of in-home video. In addition, a 230-page Documentation Manual that describes everything we have done since 2011 and documents every piece of data collected is finished. This manual can also serve as a user's guide to anyone wishing to replicate this study in another site. We are now preparing the data for analysis and will be seeking planning grant funds to carry out several interim steps.

## The NJFS Team



**Kati Li** played a key role in creating the Documentation Manual for the data collection portion of the New Jersey Families Study and in leading early efforts on the pre-analysis phase. She is excited about the use of video ethnography in the project, in particular the ways that this unique research approach yields rich data that can be used to answer a wide variety of research questions on families, discipline, learning, and children's cognitive development.

Kati has always been passionate about using data to understand people, answer research questions, and improve programs. In an earlier position as an institutional researcher, she collected, analyzed, and reported data to inform program and institutional policymaking in higher education. She evaluated placement testing policy, a university's study abroad program, and an initiative aiming to retain and graduate first-generation college students.

She is a Princeton sociology Ph.D. graduate. Her dissertation, which drew from 70 interviews she conducted with mental health professionals, explores how mental health providers' treatment approaches are shaped by therapists' religious beliefs, licensure and training, work environments, and clients. In June 2019, Kati began a full-time research position at Mathematica, collecting survey data for large-scale, multi-year evaluation projects.

**Richmond Aririguzoh** is a senior at Princeton University with a major in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. His academic interests involve conservation and the role of human influence on different endangered species. This past summer he spent six weeks in Northwestern Madagascar with Operation Wallacea, a conservation research organization, investigating the mechanisms by which anthropogenic elements affect the declining populations of the endangered coquerel's sifaka. In addition, Richmond is also interested in disease ecology and healthcare accessibility both locally and globally. He served as a project manager for My Life Movement, a non-profit based in his hometown of Trenton, NJ. On campus, he is a captain of the men's varsity basketball team and a student-athlete wellness leader. Many of the children in NJFS families loved having their pictures taken next to Richmond who is 6'9" tall.



**Auggie Bhavsar** is a junior at the Dalton School in New York City. Over the summer, he worked with the New Jersey Families Study in developing an annotated bibliography for future grant proposals, mainly concerning informal learning. The bibliography consisted of roughly 30 individual sociology studies focusing on the variety of techniques families use to help toddlers learn. He also collected data on early childhood interventions and their effects on youth development and cognitive ability. Auggie enjoys playing squash at a competitive level and is president of the French Club. He hopes to return next summer and continue his work.



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## Contact Information

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

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