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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 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

Members of the NJFS team at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University have been working to identify and analyze parent-child interactions in the video data. Supported by a \$251,327 grant from the National Science Foundation, Dr. Joanne W. Golann and her research team are examining similarities and differences in parenting strategies by social class. They are currently focused on mealtime interactions and how caregivers and children negotiate what to eat, when to eat, and how much to eat. Research assistants have contributed to this work by identifying clips of interest and completing thematic logs, narrative summaries, and analytic memos.

New Members of the NJFS Team



Kanoe Bonilla is a sophomore at Vanderbilt majoring in Child Development with a double minor in Neuroscience and History of Art. She is involved in Vanderbilt Volunteers for Health and the Philippine Intercultural Student Organization. Kanoe is interested in the effects of caregiver-child interactions and its intersection with neurological constraints on kindergarten readiness/academic performance. After her time at Vanderbilt, Kanoe aspires to go to medical school to become a specialized pediatrician.

Maria Maria Castillo is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations at Vanderbilt University. Maria is interested in K-12 finance and examining how policies and interventions can improve mathematical learning outcomes and educational experiences for low-income students of color. Maria earned her bachelor's degree in mathematics from Mount Holyoke College and her Ed.M. in Teacher Education from Harvard's Graduate School of Education.



Monica Shen is a junior at Vanderbilt majoring in Child Development and Medicine, Health, & Society, with a minor in Biological Sciences. She is in the Honors Program in Psychological Science, investigating the dynamic interactions between perceived stress, family dynamics, and school inclusivity in a sample of Chinese international college students and their parents. She aspires to be a researcher in developmental psychology.

Grace Xu is a junior at Vanderbilt majoring in Elementary Education and Child Development, with a minor in Data Science. Grace is involved in various tutoring programs and has observed multiple classrooms with children ranging from eight months to 5th grade.



Contact Information

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

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

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